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Uzbekistan denies amnesty after "illegal religious activity"

Jehovah's Witnesses Public Affairs Office (30.12.2009) / HRWF (05.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Three of Jehovah's Witnesses who remain in prison for sentences of up to four years for allegedly organizing "illegal religious activity" have been excluded from amnesty considerations.

In 2008, Abdubannob Ahmedov and Sergey Ivanov were sentenced to four years and three and one-half years in prison, respectively, in Margilan, Fergana Region, Uzbekistan, for organizing illegal religious activity. Olim Turayev, a medical doctor and married father of three sons, recently completed the first year of his four-year sentence in a labor colony near Samarkand, also for "illegal religious activity" and for teaching religion.

The same day that an application for amnesty was submitted in behalf of Olim Turayev, he was found guilty of "violating the prison routine." Prisoners found guilty of such a violation cannot be granted amnesty. Turayev was immediately transferred from an "open" labor colony to a "general" labor colony in Tavaksai, Tashkent Region.

Abdubannob Ahmedov also was subsequently accused of "violating the prison routine." As a result, Ahmedov no longer qualifies for an amnesty and has been transferred to the general labor colony in Navoi (near Samarkand). Sergey Ivanov is being held in the Tavaksai general labor colony in the Tashkent Region.

Appeals of the convictions of these three have also been denied. A formal request in their behalf to Uzbekistan's State Committee of Religious Affairs to support an amnesty for Jehovah's Witnesses who are imprisoned for practicing their faith was not successful. Jehovah's Witnesses continue to seek a constructive dialogue with Uzbek authorities regarding these prisoners.

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Appeal court upholds conviction of seven women in Tashkent

Jehovah's Witnesses Public Affairs Office (30.12.2009) / HRWF (05.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Appeals have been rejected for seven women, all Jehovah's Witnesses, who were convicted of "conducting illegal religious activity" and for "violating rules of religious meetings." Three of the women, 57-year-old Nabieva Mamlakat, 39-year-old Farahova Angelina, and 38-year-old Tashboltaeva Gulchehra, were sentenced to five days of custody, while the other four women were each fined the equivalent of US\$1,350.

When the case was first presented to the court, the women explained that they were only socializing together. Judge Sh. Bakayev dismissed the case and the women were sent to their homes but were told to return the following day. When they returned the next day, all seven were summarily convicted and the sentences were imposed. These arrests appear to be compounding a pattern of religious intolerance in Uzbekistan: the number of Jehovah's Witnesses arrested and prosecuted this year alone now totals more than 50.

The continued intolerance to religious minorities is surprising in view of Uzbekistan's guarantee of freedom of religion to all its citizens under the Uzbekistan Constitution. Uzbekistan is also a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which, under Article 18, assures citizens religious freedom.

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State close to removing Baptist leadership

Felix Corley

Forum 18 (07.12.2009) / HRWF (08.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Baptists in Uzbekistan have told Forum 18 News Service that they fear the head of the Baptist Union, Pavel Peichev, and the Union's accountant Yelena Kurbatova will now be removed from their roles leading the registered Baptist Union. This follows a Criminal Court in the capital Tashkent upholding the criminal conviction of the two, as well as of a Baptist layman Dmitri Pitirimov. The Court also upheld a three-year ban on each holding responsible positions. However, the court overturned massive fines on each. The three continue to insist that the charges against them of evading taxes and involving children in religious activity without their or their parents' consent were

fabricated. Peichev stated that an appeal to the Supreme Court will probably be made. "The conviction was unjust and we want it overturned," he told Forum 18. Baptists in Uzbekistan have repeatedly insisted to Forum 18 that the authorities' main aim was to remove the leadership of the Baptist Union, continuing a pattern of state interference in the leadership of religious communities such as the Muslim and Jewish communities. Also, the Justice Ministry has forced a church website to close.

Baptists in Uzbekistan have told Forum 18 News Service of their fear that the head of the Baptist Union, Pavel Peichev, and the Union's accountant Yelena Kurbatova will now be removed from their leadership roles by the state. Tashkent city Criminal Court in the capital upheld the criminal conviction of the two, as well as of a Baptist layman Dmitri Pitirimov, at their appeal on 4 December. It also upheld a three-year ban on each holding responsible positions. However, the court overturned the massive fines on each, a decision greeted with relief by local Baptists. The three continue to insist that the charges against them of evading taxes and involving children in religious activity without their or their parents' consent were fabricated.

"We will probably lodge a further appeal to the Supreme Court," Peichev told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 7 December. "The conviction was unjust and we want it overturned." He said the Union will wait to receive the written judgment – expected in about a week – before deciding what course of action to take.

Pitirimov was more outspoken. "Although we won't now have to pay the massive fines, we still have a criminal record," he complained to Forum 18 from Tashkent on 7 December. "It means that all the false accusations that Baptists psychologically harm children against the will of their parents and keep them half starving like animals are now pure truth."

He warns that the court ruling that the three will not be able to hold any responsible positions for three years will be the most serious impact of the court decisions. "Pavel can't be leader of the Baptist Union any more – that's clear. Court executors will enforce this. Yelena won't be able to have anything to do with finances, but accounting is her only profession. This is serious for the Baptist Union and serious for them."

Baptists in Uzbekistan have repeatedly insisted to Forum 18 that the authorities' main aim was to remove the leadership of the Baptist Union.

Article 45 of the Criminal Code, which covers deprivation of rights (such as enforced removal from office), notes that the period of the punishment begins when the sentence comes into force. The Court is now due to send the written verdict to the local police where the three Baptists live for their Inspectorate for Enforcement of Punishments to oversee. The Inspectorate is due to write to the Baptist Union to ensure that those found guilty are removed from office.

The three will also be summoned to the police to present a series of personal documents (including names and addresses of all relatives) and sign a statement that they will not leave Tashkent without prior permission from the Inspectorate. They will also be subjected to periodic "prophylactic check-ups" by their local police officer. "They will be kept under tight observation," one Baptist told Forum 18.

Pitirimov said the verdict is less likely to have an impact on him, as he holds no position with the Baptist Union and works in business. His role as director of the Joy Baptist summer camp is as an unpaid volunteer.

No officials at the Justice Ministry, the City Criminal Court, the Religious Affairs Committee or the government-sponsored National Human Rights Centre of Uzbekistan

were answering their telephones on 7 December because of the public holiday marking Uzbekistan's Constitution.

Criminal prosecution

Trouble for the Baptists began after officials visited the Joy summer camp the church runs on a site it owns in Tashkent Region's Bostanlyk District during the summer. They then started questioning parents and children who had visited the camp in previous years and also claimed that the Baptist Union had failed to pay taxes they owed since 2006. The investigation was accompanied by hostile coverage in the state-run media.

The criminal case against Peichev, Kurbatova and Pitirimov was lodged by Tashkent City Prosecutor's Office under Uzbekistan's Criminal Code Article 184 Part 2a and 2b and Article 145 Part 2.

Article 184 Part 2a punishes repeatedly evading taxes, levies and other charges, while Part 2b covers such offences "on a grand scale" with a fine between 150 and 300 times the minimum monthly wage or between two and three years' correctional labour or up to three years' deprivation of liberty.

Article 145 Part 2 punishes involving under-aged children in a religious organisation, as well as teaching them religion against their will or the will of their parents or guardians, with a fine of between 50 and 75 times the minimum monthly wage or between two and three years' correctional labour or up to three years' deprivation of liberty.

On 29 October, at the end of their high-profile trial, Judge Nodyr Akbarov of Tashkent's Yakkasaray District Criminal Court found Peichev, Kurbatova and Pitirimov guilty on both charges. As well as being banned from administrative functions for three years, each was fined 260 times the minimum monthly wage. The fines come to 8,747,700 Soms (32,820 Norwegian Kroner, 3,900 Euros, or 5,760 US Dollars) each.

The Baptist Union was also ordered to pay to the State Budget the allegedly unpaid taxes on their income from the Children's Camp amounting to 3,620,200 Soms (13,580 Norwegian Kroner, 1,615 Euros, or 2,380 US Dollars).

At the 4 December appeal, the three judges of the court - Kurbanov, Tashpulatov and Sadykov - ruled that the three were guilty but said the offences fell under the amnesty declared by the Oliy Majlis (Parliament) in August, so the fines were cancelled. However, this left the three with a criminal record and the ban on holding positions for three years. Baptists told Forum 18 that the hearing lasted only 20 minutes and was delayed by two hours until an official from the United States embassy who was hoping to attend had left. Only the lawyer and a pastor of the Union were allowed into the courtroom in addition to the defendants.

The lawyer for the three called for the earlier sentences to be annulled, telling the court that 61 mistakes had been found in the tax inspection certificate drawn up by Makhamadjon Akhunov and pointing out that those summoned as witnesses in the case had all withdrawn the testimony against the three given during the investigation.

Each of the three defendants was asked whether they consider themselves innocent or guilty and all three insisted the charges against them had been fabricated. Pitirimov in particular pointed out that he should not have been punished in any case on the tax accusation as he holds no function with the Baptist Union and is not paid for running the Joy camp. The prosecutor's assistant, Kanibaev, then insisted that the charges against all three were accurate. The judge then asked the defendants to leave the courtroom, but then returned three minutes later with the verdict.

Forum 18 understands that even if any appeal is lodged to Uzbekistan's Supreme Court, the 4 December decision goes into force.

The three Baptists also lodged complaints against Anatoli Tadjibayev, Tashkent City Prosecutor's Office Senior Investigator, as well as against a lawyer Ramiz Azimov, who had been appointed to assist them. Instead of that, the Baptists complain that despite never having seen him, Azimov signed 18 documents with prosecutors which were fabricated. Azimov's office telephone went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 7 December.

Baptists have also told Forum 18 that on 9 November, the verdict of the 29 October hearing was received which indicated that another Baptist, Valery Konovalov, had been prosecuted in his absence after being questioned as a witness in the case.

Judge Nodyr Akbarov of Yakkasaray District Criminal Court found Konovalov guilty of violating Article 240 Part 2 ("proselytism") and Article 241 ("teaching religious beliefs without specialised religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organisation, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately") of the Code of Administrative Offences. He was fined 2,804,200 Soms (10,616 Norwegian Kroner, 1,253 Euros or 1,858 US Dollars). "This was a nonsense," one Baptist complained to Forum 18. "The amnesty on the fines handed down on the three was not extended to Konovalov, so he must pay this fine."

Enforced leadership change

The 55-year-old Peichev has led the Baptist Union since 1994, though he no longer has a position as a pastor of any individual congregation in the Union. In April 2008 he was elected as one of two vice-presidents of the Euro-Asian Baptist Federation at its congress in the Ukrainian capital Kiev.

Peichev's family suffered for their faith during the Soviet period. His paternal grandfather was arrested as an active Baptist under Stalin and died in a Siberian labour camp, while his children (including Pavel Peichev's father) were scattered to various state orphanages. Also under Stalin, his maternal grandfather had to flee with his family in the middle of the night to escape arrest, moving from Russia to Uzbekistan.

The Uzbek state authorities already control all leading Muslim appointments, from the Chief Mufti downwards. This is the only religious community where its leaders are nominated directly by the state.

The authorities have also interfered in the leadership of other religious communities by expelling from the country foreign citizen leaders they dislike. The head of the Jewish community, Chief Rabbi Abe David Gurevich, was forced to leave Uzbekistan in June 2008 after the Justice Ministry refused to renew the accreditation for him and his wife Malka to work in the country. Russian-born but with both a US passport and an Israeli passport, Gurevich had worked in Uzbekistan since 1990.

Severe state controls continue

The criminal conviction of the three Baptists came as the Uzbek authorities continued their tight control over all religious activity in the country.

On 26 November, Judge H. Rahimova of the Appeal Court of Surkhandarya Region upheld fines handed down on 23 October by a District Court on eleven local Protestants. The Protestants had gathered for a meal together, but the authorities punished them for holding an illegal religious meeting.

The Appeal Court left the fines on ten of the Protestants unchanged, but reduced the fine on Muhabbat Kobulova by two thirds. She must now pay 10 times the minimum monthly wage or 336,450 Soms (1,250 Norwegian Kroner, 150 Euros, or 220 US Dollars).

State sponsored region.uz news agency reported on 10 November that Jens Gregersen, a Danish citizen, was deported from Uzbekistan for illegal religious activity. The agency said that he was accused of using his business activity, selling computers in Uzbekistan as a cover up for spreading the Jehovah's Witnesses faith.

Jehovah's Witnesses denied that Gregersen was a member or had held Jehovah's Witness meetings in his home in Tashkent. "As far as we know, this businessman is not one of Jehovah's Witnesses," they told Forum 18, "he did not study the Bible with Jehovah's Witnesses, there were no meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses in his house or something else."

The Uzbek authorities again restricted the number of Muslims allowed to go on the annual haj pilgrimage to Mecca in November. Some 5,000 are reported to have undertaken the pilgrimage, although Uzbekistan is believed to have a quota of some 25,000. All pilgrims once again needed approval not only from the local office of the Muslim Board but also from mahalla (city district) committees where they live and the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. State controls on the haj have been in place for more than a decade.

More internet censorship

The Justice Ministry has also forced the Full Gospel Protestant Union to close down its website <http://www.church.uz>, Forum 18 has learnt. During a check-up on whether the Union's activity was in accordance with the law in 2008, the Justice Ministry insisted the Union had to register the website. However, subsequent attempts to do so with the Uzbek Press and Information Agency got nowhere. In a letter of 17 August in the wake of a further check-up, Deputy Minister Sobir Holbaev issued a "request" that the Union halt using the site. The Union then issued a message to readers of its website apologising for the "enforced closure of the site".

Utkur Juraev, an official with the Press and Information Agency, insisted to Forum 18 in September that it registers all applications "without exception if the documents are in order". He said he could not remember why the Full Gospel Union's website had not been registered.

Internet censorship is normally done at the instigation of the NSS secret police. Internet service providers (ISPs) in Uzbekistan blame the blocking of sites on Uznet, owned by the state provider Uzbektelecom and through which all ISPs have to connect to the internet. Uznet insists that sites are already blocked by the NSS. "We don't block websites – this is done by the NSS secret police. The NSS open the connections for us – they have all the equipment there," an Uznet employee told Forum 18. Uzbekistan has long barred access to more websites than any other Central Asian country

Muslim women arrested in Southern Uzbekistan

RFE/RL (18.11.2009) / HRWF (19.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Some 30 women have been arrested in the southern Uzbek city of Karshi since the beginning of November, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports.

Mehriniso Hamdamova, 40, a teacher of a religious course for women at Karshi's Kuk Gumbaz Mosque, is the latest woman to have been arrested.

Hamdamova's daughter, Latofat Orzikulova, told RFE/RL that in the early morning of November 5 a dozen police and security officers entered Hamdamova's home and searched it.

She said that although they found nothing illegal they confiscated two Uzbek films on CDs and a book given to Hamdamova as a gift by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Uzbekistan.

Hamdamova is being held in pretrial detention after being charged with establishing "jamoats" (societies) and promoting them among young people.

Orzikulova said that on the same day several of Hamdamova's female relatives -- including her sister, a daughter-in-law, and nieces -- were also arrested. Orzikulova said police refused to say why her relatives were arrested.

The detentions are the latest in a string of arrests of women in Karshi.

Shoira Karomova, who works at a state department on religious affairs dealing with women and who helped develop the religious course taught by Hamdamova, told RFE/RL that she does not think Hamdamova's professional activities were the reason for her arrest, because her course had been officially approved.

Surat Ikromov, a leader of the Independent Group for Human Rights Defenders, told RFE/RL that the arrested women have been pressured while in detention in Karshi to give evidence against Hamdamova.

Hamdamova's relatives have appealed for help in the case to President Islam Karimov, the prosecutor-general, the head of the state security service, and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Uzbekistan.

Fined 260 times monthly minimum wage each – and banned from leading religious communities?

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (29.10.2009) / HRWF (29.10.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - At the end of a high-profile trial in the Uzbek capital Tashkent today (29 October), Judge Nodyr Akbarov of Yakkasaray District Criminal Court found Pavel Peichev, Head of Uzbekistan's Baptist Union, and two colleagues guilty of evading taxes and involving children in religious activity without their or their parents' consent, the Judge and the Baptists told Forum 18 News Service. Each was fined 260 times the minimum monthly wage. Significantly, the ruling also deprives Peichev and his colleagues of the right to lead an organisation's administrative and financial activity for three years. Moreover, the Baptist Union will have to pay to the State Budget the allegedly unpaid taxes on their income from the Children's Camp.

As the minimum monthly wage is 33,645 Soms (125 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros, or 22 US Dollars) from 1 August 2009, under a Decree by President Islam Karimov, the fines come to 8,747,700 Soms (32,820 Norwegian Kroner, 3,900 Euros, or 5,760 US Dollars) each.

The Court also claimed in its ruling that the Baptist Union owes in unpaid taxes 3,620,200 Soms (13,580 Norwegian Kroner, 1,615 Euros, or 2,380 US Dollars).

Punished alongside Peichev was Yelena Kurbatova, the Union's accountant, and Dmitri Pitirimov, Director of the Joy Baptist Children's Camp. The written verdict is expected to be handed down in the next ten days; only then can the three Baptists lodge appeals against the ruling.

What does the ban on leading "financial and administrative activity" mean?

Judge Akbarov on 29 October confirmed the fine and three-year deprivation of the Baptists' right to lead administrative and financial activity, but refused to explain to Forum 18 what the decision precisely meant. "Please talk to the Baptists' lawyer about it," he said and then hung up the phone.

Also unable to tell Forum 18 on 29 October if Peichev and his colleagues can continue to work in the Baptist Union was an aide to Artyk Yusupov, the head of the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. "I don't know anything about this case. If this purely relates to tax we wouldn't be able to do anything about it. I will have to study this issue."

Peichev of the Baptist Union said he assumed that the court decision means he could not now lead the Union. "We will have to find out what this decision exactly means, and of course we are planning to challenge it in the higher courts," he told Forum 18 on 29 October. "We do not have the court decision at the moment but we understood that the three of us will have to pay a total of 26,243,100 Soms (98,400 Norwegian Kroner, 11,700 Euros, or 17,280 US Dollars) in fines, plus the so-called unpaid taxes," he complained.

Was "real intention" to remove Baptist leadership?

Peichev's fellow-Baptist and defendant Pitirimov also complaining about the court decision. "Despite the fact that it was proven in the court the whole case was fabricated, the Judge still went ahead and made a decision against us," he told Forum 18 on 29 October. Tashkent City Prosecutor's Office brought criminal charges against the three Baptists under Uzbekistan's Criminal Code Article 184 Part 2a and 2b and Article 145 Part 2 for allegedly evading taxes and involving children in religious activity without their or their parents' consent. The Baptists and some of the parents involved vehemently denied the charges.

Pitirimov supposed that the "real intention" of the court case was "not to fine" the Baptists but "remove the three" - Peichev, Pitirimov and Kurbatova - from the leadership of the Baptist Union. "As Jesus says in the Gospels, 'I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered'," he said. "One can only imagine what kind of further attacks may come from the authorities," he added.

He said they intend to file an appeal immediately they receive the court decision. "We are supposed to get the decision from the court tomorrow," he said.

At each of the hearings, including the final hearing when the verdict was announced, church members have gathered outside the courthouse to show their support for the three. Only close family members of the defendants were allowed into the courtroom.

Baptist sources told Forum 18 that in the week of 19 to 23 October, all three registered Baptist Union congregations in Tashkent were visited by officials from the city Justice Department. The officials checked whether the churches' official documents were in order, and whether their activities conformed to Uzbekistan's restrictive laws. All three congregations were told to correct "errors" uncovered in their activity.

Existing state interference in leadership of religious communities

If the verdict does mean that for the next three years Peichev and his colleagues can play no part in leading the Baptist Union, this would represent interference in the Union's free choice of its leaders. It is possible they could also be deprived of the right to lead an individual congregation of the Union.

The state authorities already control all leading Muslim appointments, from the Chief Mufti downwards. This is the only religious community where its leaders are nominated directly by the state.

The authorities have also interfered in the leadership of other religious communities by expelling from the country foreign citizen leaders they dislike. The head of the Jewish community, Chief Rabbi Abe David Gurevich, was forced to leave Uzbekistan in June 2008 after the Justice Ministry refused to renew the accreditation for him and his wife Malka to work in the country. Russian-born but with both a US passport and an Israeli passport, Gurevich had worked in Uzbekistan since 1990.

Renewed state incitement of intolerance against exercising religious freedom

The trial and verdicts on the three Baptists in Tashkent come at a time of heightened state-run activity against religious minorities. The Justice Ministry website reported on 4 August on a seminar held in the town of Jizzak on "overcoming human trafficking, religious extremism and missionary activity". The seminar, organised by Akmal Boimatov of the town's second state notary office, heard presentations from officials of the local Hokimat, the police, registry office and mahalla leaders "on such concepts as missionary activity, proselytism, protection of young people from the harmful influence of extremist movements, and on how we are all responsible for the moral education of the young generation".

Forum 18 was unable to reach Boimatov on 28 October to find out why sharing one's faith needs to be overcome in the same way as human trafficking and extremism. Sharing beliefs with others is a criminal offence in Uzbekistan, breaking the state's international human rights commitments.

Newspapers and websites have continued to publish alarmist articles against missionary activity, including a 2 October article in the newspaper "Chirchik" which was picked up by other websites. Journalist M. Yusupova alleges – without giving any concrete examples – that the Jehovah's Witnesses have gained converts and have stripped them of their homes and all their money. "Missionary activity and religious propaganda violates the laws both of our state and many others," she insists, without naming other countries where sharing faith is illegal. She insists that religious preaching should take place "at the juridical address of a religious organisation, not on the street".

Throughout all of Uzbekistan the authorities have been rebroadcasting TV films encouraging intolerance and attacking religious minorities as well as freedom of religion or belief. For example, for several weeks in September the Kamalak cable television channel rebroadcast in prime evening viewing the 2008 film "In the Clutches of Ignorance", Tashkent residents told Forum 18. "I was furious," one Protestant who asked not to be identified told Forum 18. "There was so much hostility and so many errors of fact in the film."

"In the Clutches of Ignorance", a film made by Uzbek State Television, was first broadcast in May 2008 and again in June 2008. It singled out unspecified "missionary activities" for attack, describing them as "a global problem along with religious dogmatism, fundamentalism, terrorism and drug addiction." Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians and Methodists were all described as being responsible for this "global problem." The film claimed that Uzbek citizens' "low political awareness and legal culture make them an easy target for the missionaries." The film

provoked a letter of protest from the leaders of 26 Protestant congregations across Uzbekistan.

Munira Hakimova of Kamalak TV said that the channel only rebroadcasts programme made by other channels. "We do not have our own production," she told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 28 October. She said that it is the Director of Uzbekistan State radio and television company who decides what shows to rebroadcast.

Some sources told Forum 18 the film was also repeated on other local television channels elsewhere in Uzbekistan in September.

In October, another Tashkent cable television channel, Stojari, rebroadcast the 2006 film "Hypocrisy" during primetime evening viewing. The independent news agency Uznews.net reported on 23 October that the film was shown without prior notification and interrupted what it believed would be far more popular programmes being rebroadcast from the Russian television channel NTV.

"Hypocrisy", made by Uzbek state television and first shown in November and December 2006, includes claims that Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses turn people into zombies and drive them to psychiatric hospitals.

The telephone helpline given at the end of the programme turned out to belong to the Media-Business company, Uznews.net noted. It quoted the firm's director, Bahodir Yuldashev as telling it that the Uzbek Journalists' Union had asked it to allow its number to be given. He insisted that the helpline was not set up to give people the opportunity to "inform" on "new religious sects", but rather to allow them to "share with the editorial team their impressions of the film and their views on the phenomenon". Asked whether the state authorities had initiated the re-broadcast of the film, Yuldashev told Uznews.net: "No comment."

"A lot of people became suspicious of Protestants in the wake of these previous films in 2006 and 2008," one Tashkent Protestant told Forum 18. "For church members too it was a stumbling block – some people were shaken in their faith. I fear the same could happen again."

Another Protestant recalled to Forum 18 that a church member shown in one of the films was recognised by a taxi driver the following day and was asked if she was a "sectarian". "And at the market where she was a trader, everyone immediately spotted her and adopted a hostile attitude to her."

Religious prisoners of conscience excluded from amnesty?

On 28 August the Senate, the Upper House of Parliament, issued a decree establishing a prisoner amnesty to mark the 18th anniversary of Uzbekistan's independence. Prisoners in certain categories were due to be amnestied in the three months from the date of the decree. However, Forum 18 is unaware of any religious prisoners of conscience to have been freed in the wake of the decree.

Amid a huge crackdown in 2009 on adherents of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, 47 men were given prison sentences totalling some 380 years on charges that their friends say were fabricated.

Among other prisoners of conscience still serving sentences are a Pentecostal Pastor from Andijan [Andijon] in eastern Uzbekistan, Dmitry Shestakov, who is serving a four year sentence, and three Jehovah's Witnesses: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, and Olim Turaev.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that the prison authorities have taken steps over several years to prevent their prisoners being eligible for prisoner amnesties. On 12 August Turaev's lawyer lodged an appeal to the Pastdargom District Prosecutor's Office of Samarkand Region for the forthcoming amnesty to be applied to him.

However, the same day the administration of the labour camp where he was being held transferred him to the investigation isolation cell at Kattakurgan after accusing him of violating the prison regime, an accusation Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 was false. Pastdargom Court ruled that Turaev was guilty and changed the rest of his four-year sentence to be served not in an open-type prison but in a general regime labour camp, the next harshest category of imprisonment. This made him ineligible for the amnesty.

Transferred at about the same time to Tashkent prison was Ahmedov after he too was accused of violating the prison regime, Jehovah's Witnesses also told Forum 18. "Such actions by the authorities are aimed at depriving these prisoners of the possibility of being amnestied in 2009." They point out that a similar move was used in 2008 to deprive the then prisoner Irfon Khamidov of being included in that year's prisoner amnesty.

Khamidov was freed on 14 May 2009 after completing two years' imprisonment, but was then deported to his native Tajikistan the following day after seeing his then two-year-old son for the first time.

In addition to these long-term prisoners of conscience, the Uzbek authorities are increasingly using imprisonment for up to 15 days to punish members of minority religious communities. Several Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have been handed such sentences so far this year. Most recently, two Baha'is were given 15-day prison terms in Tashkent in July for "resisting police officers in carrying out their duties", while the pastor and three other members of a registered Protestant church in Tashkent were each given 15-day terms in August on charges of leading an "unauthorised" religious meeting.

Muslim and Christian worship attacked

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (18.09.2009) / HRWF (19.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Uzbekistan continues to take action against peaceful meetings for worship, Forum 18 News Service has learned, the latest known incidents being attempts to stop women and children attending mosques and raids on Protestant churches with prosecution of some of their members. After one raid, police claimed that they had confiscated Muslim and Jehovah's Witness literature from Protestants. They have denied to Forum 18 that they possessed this literature. Attempts to stop people attending mosques are currently known to be taking place in both Bukhara [Bukhoro] and Namangan regions.

Children barred from attending mosques

Namangan Region in south-east Uzbekistan is the latest known region to have tried to stop children attending mosques. These moves follow the south-eastern Kashkadarya Region, where Muslim and Christian children and parents have been threatened for attending places of worship.

A Muslim in Namangan, who wished to remain unnamed for the fear of reprisals from authorities, told Forum 18 that there is a ban on children attending night prayers in the

Muslim holy month of Ramadan. This ban has also been imposed throughout Uzbekistan in the past, particularly in the Fergana [Farghona] Valley which Namangan is part of.

"Soon everybody in the country will become unbelievers," the Muslim complained to Forum 18 on 17 September. He said that the law does "not allow" children to attend mosques during the school hours but authorities "do not allow children even after school." "I agree that children should go to school but they also need to know about their faith," he stressed.

The ferghana.ru news agency reported on 31 August that police with the imams of mosques are enforcing the ban. "Children belong to the President [Islam Karimov, President of Uzbekistan] not to the religious leaders", the authorities tell imams in weekly meetings of imams," the agency reported. Bahadyr Irisov, Deputy Hokim (Head of Administration) of Namangan Region, is reported by the news agency to have given an order that the Deputy Chief Imam of Namangan should stand at the doors of the main mosque with Police, to bar children from the mosque.

Deputy Hokim Irisov told Forum 18 on 15 September that "the law" bans children from attending mosques or any other religious meetings during the school hours. "My personal opinion is that children of school age should not attend religious meetings at all but study," he stated.

"We are not going to put children in prison," Irisov said, when asked whether anyone would be punished if children were found attending mosques. He did not say whether teachers or parents would be punished.

Irisov claimed that voluntary courses on world religions are taught in schools and higher education institutions throughout the country. "Children can learn about religions in those courses," he said.

Asked whether children in Namangan would be allowed in the mosques for the end of Ramadan celebration, Irisov said he did "not see why not." "It is their choice after all, and we live in a democratic country," he said.

Orders to religious communities to suppress religious activity have often been issued in Uzbekistan. A document from Andijan [Andijon] regional administrations has revealed the extent to which the authorities issue orders to religious communities – which they are expected to obey.

Women barred from attending mosques

Women elsewhere in Uzbekistan are, Forum 18 has been told, being dissuaded from attending mosques. Mutabar Akhmedova, a human rights defender from Tashkent told Forum 18 on 17 September that it is not widely socially acceptable for women to attend mosques, because of the presence of men. But the state authorities particularly disapprove of women who are active Muslims attending mosques.

The authorities in Bukhara Region, in central Uzbekistan, have banned women from attending Friday prayers in mosques, ferghana.ru reported on 17 August. Abdurahim Baltayev, Deputy Hokim of Bukhara Region, who oversees religious organisations, told Forum 18 on 17 September that he is "not aware" of such a ban, and the Hokimat (Administration) has not given such instruction. "Please, ask the mosques or medressahs [Islamic religious schools]," he responded. Asked whether women are allowed to attend mosques, he said, "I cannot say anything, I am not a specialist on that issue."

Janmuhammad Gulov, the Imam of the Piri Dastgir mosque, told Forum 18 on 17 September that around 20 women attend the mosque for prayers, and that they have not told women to stop coming. "Please talk to the Chief Imam [of Bukhara] Mukhiddin

Nugmanov," he said, who issued the ban. He added that "women are not to attend mosque according to Hanafi teachings" for the Friday sermons.

Shokhida Abdullayeva, the Director of Bukhara's women's medressah "Zhubori Kalon" had told ferghana.ru that "Women attend mosques because of their ignorance." She refused to talk to Forum 18 on 17 September and put the phone down as soon as she heard Forum 18's name. Called back minutes later, her Secretary (who did not give her name) said that "the Director is not here, please talk to Imam Mukhiddin Nugmanov," and put the phone down.

Chief Imam Nugmanov's phone went unanswered on 17 September.

Muslim religious activity has been particularly targeted by the authorities during 2009, with 47 known prisoners of conscience, who are followers of the approach of Turkish theologian Said Nursi, being sentenced to long prison terms this year.

Raid, prosecutions, church disputes confiscated literature claims

In Almalyk [Olmalik], near the capital Tashkent, 18 police officers raided Sunday morning worship of the unregistered United Independent Protestant Church, on 16 August. On 12 September prosecutions against six church members - Sergei Galashin, Valentina Kotikova, Rustam Abdulhayev, Mahira Abdulhayeva, Denis Bush (who is a Russian citizen) and Sergei Zarubin - were brought before the town's Criminal Court. The six are being tried under part 1 Article 240 of the Administrative Code, which punishes violations of the Religion Law, a Protestant who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

Unregistered religious activity is - in defiance of international human rights agreements - a criminal offence in Uzbekistan.

The Chancellery of the Court referred Forum 18 on 16 September to Judge Islom Noyobov, who will try the case. "Please come to the trial on Friday (18 September) at 10 in the morning," he told Forum 18 when asked what the charges were. He refused to talk about the case further, and hung up the phone.

The raid was, Protestants told Forum 18, made under the guise of a passport check-up at 9 am. Police broke into the building used for worship - which is rented from an officially registered church - and among the officers taking part were Major Shavkat Aminov, Chief of Almalyk Police's Criminal Investigation Department, and Senior Lieutenant Farrukh Abduganiyev, Inspector of Crime Prevention.

Even worship by registered churches in registered buildings have recently been raided, with 15-day prison sentences being imposed for the "offence" of an allegedly "unauthorised" religious meeting. Registration is in practice used by the authorities as a weapon against freedom of religion or belief.

Almalyk Police confiscated a computer hard disk and some Christian books. However 10 of the books the police claimed to have confiscated were, Protestants maintain, neither at the church or taken during the raid. These include a book entitled "Koran, the holy book of Muslims", and copies of Jehovah's Witness Watchtower magazines.

Police refused to talk to Forum 18 about the case on 15 September. The officer on duty asked Forum 18 to wait and then claimed that Major Aminov was busy and not available to talk. Senior Lieutenant Abduganiyev said - from the police station - that he "was on holidays" on 16 August. He denied taking part in the raid. "I have not checked up on that church," he claimed to Forum 18. Asked which of his colleagues participated in the raid,

he stated that "I will not give you any information over the phone." He then terminated the call abruptly.

Fined for unregistered worship

Following a raid on Sunday worship of an unregistered Baptist church in Gazalkent, Tashkent Region, on 23 August, Judge Gusara Buranova of the Bostanlyk District Criminal Court on 24 August fined church leader Aleksandr Yugay 33,645 Soms (130 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros, or 22 US Dollars) under the Administrative Code's article 240. The minimum monthly salary in Uzbekistan is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (128 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). Most of the population is poor, and has to exist on incomes that are very low.

Judge Buranova claimed to Forum 18 on 17 September that she could have given Yugay "a huge fine" under the same article but she "took into account his financial status" when giving a "minimal" fine. She did not want to comment why the police interrupted the peaceful worship of the Baptists, or what kind of punishment the Baptists would be given if found guilty of a repeat "offence." "Please, send us an official inquiry," she told Forum 18.

Unsuccessful challenge to fine

Kashkadarya Regional Criminal Court in an appeal case on 7 August upheld the Region's Mubarek District Court's decision of 9 July to punish Said Tursunov and Vladimir Khanyukov – who belong to a local unregistered Baptist Church – the equivalent of ten times the minimum monthly salary, 280,400 Soms (1,150 Norwegian Kroner, 130 Euros, or 185 US Dollars) each. The two men were charged under the Administrative Code's article 240 part 1 and article 241. Article 240 punishes violation of the Religion Law, and article 241 punishes teaching religious doctrines without state permission.

Deadly head scarves

By Farangis Najibullah

RFE/RL (31.08.2009) / HRWF (01.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - As a security measure, authorities in Uzbekistan have banned the wearing of hijabs, or Islamic head coverings, until Thursday.

State-run television say there is a risk of terrorists hiding bombs under the Islamic veil to carry out attacks in public places as the country marks its Independence Day, as well as the 2,200th anniversary of the capital, Tashkent, on Tuesday.

Uzbek officials claim that recent attacks and explosions in the country were carried out by militants hiding weapons under hijabs.

Uzbek authorities have put tight security measures in place in the run-up to the nationwide celebrations.

All border points with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been closed to prevent the possibility of militants entering Uzbek territory.

Police have become more visible in the capital.

As for the ban on the hijab, at least one Islamic veil "expert" believes it won't do much to lessen the risks to public security.

Aheda Zannetti, the creator of the Islamic swimwear known as the "burkini," says a terrorist doesn't need to hide a bomb in a hijab.

"I can hide a bomb in my underwear," said Zanetti. "Bombs are getting smaller and sharper."

Which raises the question: Just how far are Uzbek authorities willing to go with their clothing bans?

Four 15-day prison sentences for regular, registered worship service

By Felix Corley,

Forum 18 (26.08.2009) / HRWF (27.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The pastor and three other members of a registered Protestant church in the capital Tashkent have each been given fifteen-day prison terms on charges of leading an "unauthorised" religious meeting, the verdict in the case, seen by Forum 18 News Service, reveals. Local church members have expressed their shock and insist the accusations are unfounded. The arrests followed a 23 August raid on the regular Sunday afternoon worship service of the Donam Evangelical Christian Saints Church in Tashkent's Yunusabad District by some twenty officers of the Anti-Terror police.

The verdict also reveals that Christian publications seized during the raid are to be destroyed, a common fate for religious literature confiscated by police during raids on religious communities in Uzbekistan.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out why officials believe a regular service on its registered premises by a registered religious community which had included the event in its required regular quarterly report to the Justice Department that registered it is regarded as "unauthorised". Forum 18 has also been unable to find out why confiscated religious publications are to be destroyed even though they have not been proven to contain any illegal content.

The official at the State Committee for Religious Affairs who answered the phone of the Chairman, Artyk Yusupov, told Forum 18 on 25 August to talk to the Committee specialist, Begzot Kadyrov, about the case. However, Kadyrov's phone went unanswered.

The raid on the Donam Church and imprisonment of four of its members are the latest in a series of moves against communities and individuals of a variety of faiths across Uzbekistan.

In autumn 2008 the Uzbek authorities began an intensive campaign against followers of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi which is still continuing. Several dozen adherents have been given long prison sentences so far in 2009, with others being arrested and facing trial. The most recent Nursi-related sentences known to Forum 18 came in early July in Khorezm and in Samarkand (see forthcoming F18News article).

State officials in the city of Bukhara have also reportedly banned local Muslim women from attending mosques (see forthcoming F18News article).

Raid on Donam Church and sentences

Some 20 officers of the Anti-Terror police, led by Timur Daminov and Rustam Tajihanov, arrived at about 3 pm on 23 August in four cars at the worship building of the Donam Church where the service was underway, Protestants told Forum 18. Joining the officers was the local police officer Akramov and an official of the city Justice Department.

The service was being led by the assistant pastor, Andrei Sim, who explained to the officers that the Sunday afternoon service was a regular church event which had been approved by a general church meeting and whose details had been submitted as part of the regular quarterly report that all registered religious organisations are required to submit to the local Justice Department which registered them.

However, church members complain that the officers paid no attention to this. They say Daminov and Tajihanov forced Sim to write a statement about what they termed an "illegal" meeting.

The Anti-Terror officers ordered the local police officer Akramov to draw up a record of violations under Code of Administrative Offences Article 201, which punishes "violation of the procedure for organising and conducting meetings" with a fine or imprisonment of up to fifteen days, and Article 202, which punishes "creating the conditions for conducting unsanctioned meetings" with a fine of up to ten times the minimum monthly wage.

When church members showed the Anti-Terror officers the documentation proving that Sunday afternoon services were part of the approved church activity, the officers dismissed the information, insisting that church members would have to show the documents to the court.

Church members complain that the officers forced all those present to give their names and home addresses. Officers stood at the door of the church to prevent anyone leaving without giving their identity.

Police confiscated 28 videos and 181 Christian books and brochures from the church building.

At 5.30 pm that day, officers took seven church members to the Yunusabad police station. Three of those arrested - an elderly, infirm man, another man whose heavily-pregnant wife came to the police station and threatened to blame the officers if she had a miscarriage and a third man whose child was crying - were soon released from the police station. Not released were Andrei Sim, together with the church's pastor, Vladimir Tyo (who was not present at the service but who had been summoned by church members), and two other church members Yuri Tyo and Dmitri Sim.

One of those arrested, Yuri Tyo, had three young children with him. On the way to the police station, officers left the children unaccompanied on the street to find their own way home. The children arrived home safely later. Church members expressed particular concern about the police abandoning the children on the street.

Although police told church members the four detained men would be freed later that evening, they were held for more than 24 hours. Church members complain this was a violation of Article 288 Part 3 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which allows a maximum detention of 24 hours without charge for those accused of these offences.

Some time after 8 pm on the following evening, 24 August, Judge Akbar Turabov heard the case of the four at Yunusabad District Criminal Court, who all protested their innocence of any wrongdoing. According to the court verdict seen by Forum 18, the judge dismissed the accusations under Article 202, as well as religious offences under Articles 240 and 242, as the congregation is registered and the leaders were able to demonstrate that they have higher religious education. However, judge Turabov upheld the accusation

under Article 201. He found the four guilty and handed down the fifteen-day prison terms.

Judge Turabov ordered that the religious literature and videos confiscated during the raid should be destroyed. The verdict gives no reason for the ordered destruction.

After the trial the four men were taken to the detention centre of the City Police in Kuyluk District to serve their terms. A relative of one of the four was able to have a brief meeting with him in the detention centre on 25 August.

Tashkent-based human rights activist Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 that homeless people, hooligans and petty criminals are held at the Kuyluk detention centre, with about ten to fifteen people in each small cell sleeping on the wooden floor. He added that food provided to prisoners is poor.

Also detained at the same service and fined five times the minimum monthly wage was a visiting South Korean citizen.

Officials refuse to discuss raid and imprisonments

The secretary of Judge Turabov at Yunusabad District Criminal Court, who did not give her name, confirmed to Forum 18 on 25 August the sentences of the four Uzbek nationals, but refused to say anything about the South Korean national. She said Judge Turabov did not want to talk to Forum 18 about the case. "I cannot give any more information on that over the phone," she said.

The Deputy Chief of the Interior Ministry's Anti-Terror police, who did not give his name, said he was not aware of the case. "Call me back tomorrow," he told Forum 18 on 25 August.

No one at the Justice Ministry in Tashkent was available to talk about the case. The Assistant to Akborhon Nabiraev – the official who oversees work with religious organisations at the Ministry – kept asking Forum 18 to call back later on 25 August, and finally at the end of the working day telling Forum 18 that he was not available to talk: "I myself am not aware of such a case," he added.

Nor would anyone at the Tashkent City Justice Department comment. The official who answered the phone on 25 August told Forum 18 that Umid Rasulov, the chief of the Department, was on holiday. He added that everyone else was busy with checkups of various organisations.

In the wake of the raid and the imprisonments, twenty eight church members signed a letter of protest to Uzbekistan's Interior Minister, Bahodir Matlyubov, the Tashkent Justice Department and Uzbek President Islam Karimov, of which Forum 18 has seen copies. They spoke of their shock over the raid and imprisonments following a peaceful, regular, approved religious service, describing it as "an unprecedented example of the violation of human rights".

Registration a weapon against freedom of religion or belief

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (04.08.2009) / HRWF (05.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Uzbekistan has recently been through the Universal Periodic Review

(UPR) mechanism of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, and its response to recommendations was considered in Geneva on 27 July. Despite this process, religious believers of a wide variety of faiths – including but not restricted to Muslims, Protestant and Catholic Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses – continue to complain to Forum 18 News Service that the country continues to routinely commit serious violations of freedom of religion or belief.

One of the most common violations is the use of registration as a weapon against citizens' religious freedom. The most recent known instance of this were fines imposed on two Baptists, combined with threats that they would face criminal prosecutions unless their church registered within one year. The two – Vladimir Khanyukov and Said Tursunov – are members of a Baptist church in Mubarek which belongs to the Baptist Council of Churches. These churches refuse to seek state registration – as is their right under international law – as they fear that registration would enable state interference in their religious activity.

Uzbek claims on registration under the UN UPR mechanism

In response to a recommendation under the UN mechanism (by the Kingdom of the Netherlands) that Uzbekistan "fully respect the freedom of religion or belief", it claimed in part – falsely – that: "As in majority of countries with rule of law, the religious organizations must obtain legal registration and have a transparent accounting" (see document A/HRC/10/83/Add.1 of 13 March 2009).

The Uzbek response to the Dutch recommendation went on to claim that: "As a matter of fact the violation of those rules leads to amenability." The "amenability" claimed may be a reference to the continuing unsuccessful attempts to suppress religious activity without state permission.

Uzbekistan, in defiance of international human rights standards, has made unregistered religious activity a criminal offence. Yet as Professor Malcolm Evans of Bristol University has observed, "requiring faith communities to register is almost impossible to reconcile with international and OSCE [Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe] human-rights standards". "Unless it is for the purposes of tax benefits or to obtain charitable status, there should be no need for compulsory registration."

Similarly, another recommendation to Uzbekistan (by the United Kingdom) was that it should "introduce a simpler registration process for religious organisations than currently exists". In response, the Uzbek delegation stated that "currently there is an ongoing work on introducing amendments and supplements in the Law On freedom of conscience and religious organisations." This is not the first time there have been indications that Uzbekistan may be planning to change its Religion Law, the last such significant indication being in late 2007. The latest Uzbek response failed to explain how and why any changes to the Religion Law might end arbitrary denials of registration applications, and simplify the highly cumbersome procedures for submitting applications (see below).

The Uzbek Delegation also claimed that 2,300 religious organisations "of 16 religions or beliefs" exist, including 2,050 Muslim, 179 Christian (including Russian Orthodox, Baptist, Full Gospel, Seventh-day Adventist, Lutheran, Catholic, Armenian-Apostolic Church, Protestant, Jehovah's Witness, New Apostolic, Bible Society), eight Jewish societies, six Baha'i communities, one Hare Krishna community and a Buddhist temple.

It is impossible to verify these figures independently, and the state Religious Affairs Committee refused on 31 July to discuss the issue with Forum 18. However, religious believers of a wide variety of faiths have often complained to Forum 18 that such official statements mask violations of freedom of religion or belief.

Registration of Muslim communities under pressure

Uzbekistan devotes great attention to controlling all religious communities, with the majority Muslim communities being subject to tight internal and external controls.

Many mosques are reportedly either being closed or stripped of their registration in rural areas, an independent human rights defender – who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals – told Forum 18 on 29 July. "The government is against establishing mosques in kishlaks (villages)," he complained. "Not only it is difficult to register independent small mosques in rural areas, but also those which have registration are being stripped of it." The human rights defender gave the example of a small mosque in Gulistan mahalla (a residential area) in the southern Kashkadarya Region's Nishan District, built by the local Muslims on their own initiative several years ago. This mosque was stripped of its registration in June. "I personally talked to the local Muslims," the human rights defender stated. "They were 'advised' by the local Justice Department to re-register the mosque as a tea house."

It is difficult to assess the overall situation of religious communities in Uzbekistan, as many religious believers are not willing to discuss their problems for fear of reprisals from the authorities.

Abdulazim Mansurov, Deputy Head of Uzbekistan's state-controlled Muslim Board, told Forum 18 that on 31 July that registration of mosques is not a "problem." "2,050 mosques currently function, which is far more than the 84 mosques that existed during Soviet times." Asked whether he considers this number to be large enough, as this figure approximates to one mosque for every 10,000 to 15,000 Muslims, Mansurov stated that "not every Muslim attends a mosque."

Asked about the mosque in Kashkadarya's Nishan District, Mansurov said, "I am not aware what exactly happened with that mosque." He added that Uzbekistan does "not need small mosques in kishlaks. We cannot control what is going on inside those mosques. Who knows what kind of dangerous ideas some extremists can teach people in them? We have registered with the Justice Ministry all the large mosques that we need, and they can serve all the Muslims. Muslims from kishlaks can attend bigger, cathedral mosques in neighbouring areas. We can control what is going on inside the big mosques. We appoint imams for all the registered mosques."

Mansurov of the Muslim Board confirmed that work was taking place on the current Religion Law. "Of course laws should be constantly worked on, because times change and the situation changes" he stated. Asked if anyone from the Muslim Board was involved in this, he stated that "our lawyers take part in it." He added that he did not know what parts of the law were being worked on.

Other state-permitted faiths denied registration of their communities

Congregations which do not seek state registration, such as those of the Baptist Council of Churches, are not permitted to "legally" operate anywhere in Uzbekistan. However, even congregations of non-Muslim faiths who are permitted to operate in some parts of the country face great difficulties in registering their communities in other parts of the country.

There are seven Catholic parishes in Uzbekistan, but two of them – in the central town of Navoi and in the town of Angren near Tashkent – have been unable to gain registration, Bishop Jerzy Maculewicz – who leads the Catholic Church in Uzbekistan – told Forum 18 on 30 July. Bishop Maculewicz did not want to discuss details, but said that "the main difficulty is to find places in those towns to build the church buildings" and where the communities could be officially registered.

During his visit to the Holy See in October 2008, for his regular "ad limina" five-yearly meeting with the Pope, Bishop Maculewicz told the Vatican newspaper 'L'Osservatore Romano' of the "many difficulties" in officially opening these two parishes. St Joseph's Parish in Navoi lodged its registration documents with the local authorities in March 2006. The Parish bought a private flat from a parishioner in 2000 and had worshipped there, but this became impossible. Since 2006, Catholics wanting to attend Mass have had to travel 120 kms (75 miles) to Bukhara [Bukhoro] or 150 kms (95 miles) to Samarkand [Samarqand], the nearest registered Catholic parishes. The Angren Parish – which bought a small one-storey house from a parishioner in 2006 – does not have the 100 adult citizen members required to apply for registration.

Bishop Maculewicz also told the 'L'Osservatore Romano' that the authorities had not given permission to found a branch of Caritas, the Catholic charity, in the country. However, nine nuns of the Missionaries of Charity order founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta support prisoners and the poor in Tashkent, and individual parishes conduct small-scale charitable activity. He added that Catholics had asked to be allowed to open a home for people leaving hospital who need care during convalescence, but after a year and a half have still received no response from the government. Charitable work by religious believers has sometimes come under suspicion from the authorities.

Baptists from the Baptist Union told Forum 18 that, of the 60 congregations in the Union, only about 20 have been able to gain state registration. "All the rest are in a position of illegality," Baptists told Forum 18. They complain that since 1998 "not one congregation" has been able to gain registration. "The authorities always find various pretexts to refuse registration."

Registration for Russian Orthodox Church "not a problem"

In contrast, the Russian Orthodox Diocese in Tashkent told Forum 18 that gaining registration for new parishes when required is "not a problem." "We simply provide all the necessary documents," an aide to the bishop, Metropolitan Vladimir (Ikim), told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 16 July. The aide said that some 40 parishes now have registration in Uzbekistan, including a relatively new parish in Nukus where a church building is now being constructed.

The aide also pointed to an old church that has been returned in the small town of Yangi Chinaz in Tashkent Region. "We hope we will soon get registration." The aide told Forum 18 that, despite this Parish not yet having registration, priests can travel to it on Sundays and religious festivals to celebrate the Divine Liturgy.

How can communities gain state registration?

To gain state registration, communities must first have 100 adult Uzbek citizens willing both to be identified as founders and to supply their personal details to the authorities. Then, religious organisations must submit two letters of guarantee: one from the district Hokimat, confirming that the organisation to be registered has a building which corresponds to public health and fire safety requirements; and one from the mahalla committee, stating that other mahalla residents do not object to the organisation. Public health, fire safety and similar requirements are sometimes used to provide excuses to harass religious organisations.

Mahalla committees are used by the authorities as a key instrument in their attempts to control Uzbek society. Uzbek officials wrongly claim that the alleged unwillingness of local residents allows the state to, under international law, stop religious organisations from operating.

Even when a religious community has followed the state's demands and obtained permission to exist from a local authority, registration – and hence permission to carry out any religious activity – can still be refused. This has happened in the case of the Eskhol Full Gospel Church in the capital Tashkent, which has repeatedly been denied state registration. Officials have claimed that the Church's "letters of guarantee", or formal permission to function in a geographic area, from the Hokimat (local administration) of Tashkent's Chilanzar district and from the First Katta Mahalla (residential district) Committee did not correspond to official requirements.

However many religious communities do not get as far through the application process as this. When Jehovah's Witnesses in the town of Kagan, on the outskirts of Bukhara [Bukhoro], tried to register between 2006 and 2008, they faced harassment, a police raid and the ten community members were threatened with death and each given fines of five years' minimum wages. Bailiffs have made repeated visits to seize property to pay the fines.

Similarly, the latest registration application of a Jehovah's Witness community in Tashkent's Sergeli District was rejected in February 2009. The community has repeatedly lodged applications each year for many years, with no success.

Can communities keep state registration?

Even if a community has managed to become registered, there is no guarantee that it will be able to keep this status – even if it complies in full with all the authorities' formal demands. The Jehovah's Witness congregation in the eastern Fergana [Farghona] Valley was closed by the authorities, even though the congregation repeatedly insisted over the months in which the authorities moved to close it that it and its members were fully compliant with Uzbek law.

The one remaining congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in the country – in Chirchik [Chirchiq] near Tashkent – comes under occasional attack from the authorities. If this congregation loses its registration, all Jehovah's Witness activity in the entire country will automatically be banned under Uzbek law.

Why does Uzbekistan create problems?

A leader of a Protestant Church in Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of reprisals from authorities, told Forum 18 that "in 2005 our leaders were being tried by courts for having meetings at a private home." The Protestant complained that "we told the court that we did not have minimum of 100 people, but we are a community and want to exercise our faith. We were given small fines, and were forced to attend an existing registered church." The Protestant added that the authorities are trying to catch small religious groups and force them to dissolve. "When a community grows," the Protestant noted, "there is a need for a new place to worship. But if the number of believers is under 100 then you cannot legally meet in a separate place for worship. This way the authorities want to stop communities from growing."

Forum 18 has asked officials why Uzbekistan creates registration difficulties or totally denies this possibility, and why unregistered religious activity results in fines or even imprisonment.

The state Religious Affairs Committee refused to discuss these questions with Forum 18.

"I don't know," was the answer of Judge Rajabov, who presided at the most recent known trial for unregistered religious activity. "Those communities which are denied registration may complain against the Justice Departments," he added.

Asked the same questions, Zuhra Muzaffarova, Deputy Head of Tashkent City Department of the Justice Ministry, told Forum 18 on 29 July that "you should not draw a parallel between our work and the courts." She warned Forum 18 to "stay away" from Uzbekistan's internal affairs. "These are our internal issues, and you have no competence to interfere" she said brushing off Forum 18's question why her Department refused to register Sergeli District's Jehovah's Witnesses Community. "Religious communities should talk to us not to you about their registration issues," she stated. "Let them apply, and we will register them in accordance with the law." She declined to further discuss the issue with Forum 18.

Sir Walter Scott & Ivan Turgenev sent for "religious expert analysis"

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (31.07.2009) / HRWF (01.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Uzbekistan continues to take action against both Baptists who refuse to register with the state, and Muslims who follow the approach to Islam of Said Nursi, Forum 18 News Service has learnt.

More Nursi arrests and trials

The authorities have recently been targeting followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, with at least 25 people receiving jail sentences in the past year totalling some 200 years.

The most recent series of trials have been in Namangan, where earlier trials have also been held. A trial started in the Regional Criminal Court on 26 June of four people suspected being Nursi followers. The harakat.net Uzbek agency reported on 30 June that "Shokir Koraboyev, Head of Culture and Sports Division of Namangan City Hokimat [local authority] was arrested by Namangan Regional Department of the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. He is suspected of sponsoring some sportsmen who were Nursi followers."

An official in Namangan city Culture and Sport's Division told Forum 18 on 31 July that Shokir Koraboyev left his position for "health reasons", and that the new Head of the Division is Shukhrat Akralov. Strangely, Akralov said he did not know when he was appointed as the new Head of the Division. "I think Koraboyev resigned possibly on 7 May or something," he told Forum 18. "I am not sure when I was appointed, in May or June."

Asked if the resignation of Koraboyev had anything to do with his alleged involvement with Nursi followers, Akralov said, "The investigation has not finished yet, and so we cannot say anything on his involvement."

An official of the Regional Court's Chancellery, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 31 July that "he cannot give any information over the phone." Similarly, Namangan's NSS secret police asked Forum 18 on 31 July to call back later. "It's a wrong number," the officer on duty told Forum 18 when called back.

The state Religious Affairs Committee also refused to talk to Forum 18 on any of the issues on 31 July. Begzot Kadyrov of the Committee hung up the phone before Forum 18 was able to finish the question.

Unregistered Baptists pressured to register

Uzbekistan – in defiance of the international human rights agreements it has signed – has made unregistered religious activity a criminal offence. The most recent known prosecutions for this "offence" were in southern Uzbekistan, in Kashkadarya Region. Judge Shukhrat Rajabov of Mubarek District Criminal Court on 9 July fined Said Tursunov and Vladimír Khanyukov – who belong to the local unregistered Baptist Church – the equivalent of ten times the minimum monthly salary, 280,400 Soms (1,150 Norwegian Kroner, 130 Euros, or 185 US Dollars) each. They two men were charged under Uzbekistan's Administrative Code's article 240 part 1 and article 241. Article 240 punishes violation of the Religion Law, and article 241 punishes teaching religious doctrines without state permission.

Mubarek's unregistered Baptist church belongs to the Council of Churches Baptists, whose congregations on principle refuse to seek state registration, fearing this would lead to interference by the state.

Judge Rajabov during the trial accused Tursunov and Khanyukov of refusing to register their church, Forum 18 was told by Baptist sources on 30 July. Abdurauf Temirov, the Deputy Prosecutor of Mubarek, warned them saying "if within a year the church does not officially register, we will open a criminal case against you."

The two Baptists were fined for the same "offence" in May 2008, appealed unsuccessfully against this, and have not paid the fines. As the previous fines have not been paid for more than a year, under Uzbek law the fines have lapsed a local legal source told Forum 18 on 29 July. The Baptist congregation has only 10 adult members, and has faced many raids and fines. In 2008 they were warned that children who attended would be imprisoned.

The authorities consistently bully children and their parents involved in religious activity, most recently attacking a Baptist children's holiday camp.

Judge Rajabov refused on 29 July to answer questions from Forum 18 on what would happen if the latest fines were not paid. "The case is in the Regional Court now because they appealed against our decision," he responded. "Please talk to the Regional Court."

Officials at the Kashkadarya Regional Court on 30 July were unwilling to discuss the case with Forum 18, stating only that the appeal case will be heard on 7 August. Similarly, Mubarek's Prosecutor's Officials would not make comments on the case. Deputy Prosecutor Temirov's number went unanswered on 29 and 30 July.

Library – including Sir Walter Scott & Ivan Turgenev – sent for "expert analysis"

During a raid close to the capital Tashkent, on 17 July at 10 am, a group of 10 officials broke into the home of Pyotr Zvonov, a member of an unregistered Baptist church. The raid – by police and local authority officials – was followed by the confiscation of Zvonov's personal library, Forum 18 was told on 29 July by Baptists who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals. The library consisted of 120 books, several DVDs and CDs, and his personal photo album. Most of the books were Christian and some of them Bibles in different sizes, but there were also works by Sir Walter Scott and Ivan Turgenev, a sign language book, a Koran translated into Russian, and a Russian Orthodox prayer book.

Bekabad District Police are preparing to bring charges against Zvonov for "illegally producing, storing, importing and distributing of materials of a religious nature" under the Administrative Code's article 184-1," the source said. Very strict censorship and literature bans are imposed in Uzbekistan.

Bahrom Tajimatov of Bekabad police, who took part in the raid, claimed that the authorities acted on a tip-off from a "friend" of Zvonov that he stored religious literature in his home. "We have sent the books for religious expert analysis," he told Forum 18 on 24 July. "It will depend of the results of the analysis whether or not we open a case against Zvonov."

Asked why people are not allowed hold Bibles or Korans in their homes, Tajimatov said, "He [Zvonov] held Bibles in the Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik languages." He did not want to further discuss the issue and ended the call.

Officials reprimanded

In Almalyk [Olmalik], Tashkent Region, the Brislavski family – Sergei, Olga and Yekaterina – have received two official letters stating that officials have been reprimanded for actions against the family. G. Mukhamedov, Almalyk Prosecutor, stated on 26 June that administrative action will be taken against S. Zhumabayev, Almalyk Baliff. On 23 June, O. Norov, Chief of Internal Security Unit of Almalyk Bailiffs, wrote saying that Bailiff Zhumabayev was reprimanded on 18 June for procedural violations when he took action against members of the Brislavski family. Forum 18 has seen copies of both letters.

The Brislavskis were earlier harassed on several occasions by Almalyk Bailiffs trying to force them to pay the fines imposed on them by the Almalyk City Criminal Court on 3 April, Baptists have told Forum 18. The Brislavskis along with 10 other members of the local unregistered Baptist church were fined fifty times the minimum monthly wage.

The Brislavskis also, in response to their complaint against the Court decision, received a letter from S. Parpiyev, Chairman of Almalyk City Court saying that the Court made a decision to uphold the fines imposed on them, the unregistered Baptists have told Forum 18.

"Joy" children's holiday camp attacked

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (28.07.2009) / HRWF (29.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Uzbekistan's Baptist Union is facing criminal charges brought by Tashkent City Prosecutor's office for allegedly unlawfully teaching children religion, and for supposedly misusing their property in a resort area as a summer camp, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Local Baptists are very concerned by the claims and think that Pavel Peichev, the Baptist Union's Chair faces huge fines, the confiscation of the property, imprisonment, or some combination of these penalties. No officials from either the state Religious Affairs Committee or Uzbekistan's Ombudsperson's office were willing to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 28 July.

The criminal charges brought by Tashkent City Prosecutor's are against the Baptist leaders in charge of "Joy," a children's summer camp run in Bostanlyk in the Tashkent Region, which belongs to Uzbekistan's Union of Baptists. The charges relate to the Criminal Code's articles 145 part 2 and 190 part 2 point b and accuse the Baptists of:

- violating the rules of arrangement and maintenance of children's health camps;
- violating the fire-prevention rules in the period 2006-2009;
- unlawfully using Baptist property for a children's camp;

- selling vouchers for the camp in cash;

- and "involving under-age children in religious organisation as well as teaching them religion against the will of the children, their parents or persons substituting them".

Part 2 of Article 145 of Uzbekistan's Criminal Code punishes with a fine between 50 and 75 times the minimum monthly salary, or correctional labour of between two and three years, or three years deprivation of liberty for violating the Religion Law. The Criminal Code's article 190 Part 2 point b stipulates punishments of a fine of between 75 and 100 times the minimum monthly salary, or detention for 6 months for "activity, which is subject to licensing, without a license, committed by a group of persons on a prior collusion."

A source in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that Pastor Peichev was summoned on 21 July as the main defendant, and questioned by Prosecutor Anatoliy Tajibayev, who is leading the prosecution.

Prosecutor Tajibayev has also issued an order to check the financial-economic activity of and correctness of calculation of tax and other obligatory payments by the Baptist Union on their summer camp, the source said. A Baptist member of a church, which belongs to the Union, who wished to remain unnamed, said Uzbekistan's Tax Authorities had already begun checking the Union's books and accounts. A number of leaders from the Union have also been summoned and questioned by the Tashkent Prosecutor's Office in July. "The authorities will at best strip the Union of its property in the resort area and punish with heavy fines, at worst imprison the Chairman [Pavel Peichev] for 3 years, I am afraid," he told Forum 18 on 27 July.

Prosecutor Tajibayev refused to tell Forum 18 on 22 July the details of the criminal investigation, and would not clarify who exactly was being prosecuted or what the charges were. "It is an investigation secret," he responded. He also said "he cannot say" when the investigation will end. He went on to claim that "We have nothing against the [Baptist] denomination."

The Ombudsperson's Office told Forum 18 that neither Sayora Rashidova nor any of her assistants were available to talk about the case. Similarly, Artyk Yusupov, the Chair of the state Religious Affairs Office, was not available to talk. Begzot Kadyrov, a leading specialist at the Committee told Forum 18, "We have already told you that we will not talk to you a hundred times."

The first sign of trouble for the Baptists were two articles, with the same title "Grievous and Criminal Acts of 'Joy'," published on the government-sponsored Gorizont.uz news agency. The last article was on 21 July and both articles attacked the Union of Baptists of Uzbekistan for holding children's summer camps. The author makes a number of allegations which Baptists categorically deny.

Independent human rights defender sources in Uzbekistan, who wish to remain anonymous, have told Forum 18 that the Gorizont agency is sponsored by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. The NSS maintains very close surveillance of religious communities.

Azamat Karimov, the author of the article, depicts the alleged experience at the Baptist camp of Askar, a fifth grade pupil of Secondary School No. 210. Karimov claims that although "good people" offered Askar's mother a voucher at "a symbolic price of 7,000 Soms" [29 Norwegian Kroner, 3 Euros, or 5 US Dollars] for her son to attend "Joy," the end result of it was that parents of Askar have been in "shock ever since." After the camp

Askar is claimed to have "dramatically changed, became serious, taciturn, and a little absent-minded, and stopped associating with friends (..) Not only that, but also he began to say that he is sinful, that his parents are not living according to God's laws, and that their way is leading them to hell," Karimov claims.

Independent human rights defender sources in Uzbekistan have told Forum 18 that "Azamat Karimov" may well be an NSS secret police officer, using another name.

The article claims children are given Bible lessons at the camp. "Children attend religious meetings every evening. They study various Protestant books. They ask Jesus for forgiveness of their so-called sins. Children become psychologically traumatized in the camp." The author claims that parents who send their children to "Joy" do not know that it is a Baptist camp.

The author also claims that in addition to the "psychological trauma" that Askar suffered at the camp, he also had to live in "brutal conditions." It claims that sanitary-hygiene or fire-prevention rules are non-existent in the camp, and children are underfed. The author also claims to have been told by a Baptist leader, whose name he does not give, that Pastor Pitirimov "received 18,000 US Dollars [27,000,000 Uzbek Soms, 110,700 Norwegian Kroner, or 12,610 Euros] for the camp from foreign sponsors, and more contributions were supposed to be made."

Karimov says in the article that he could not enter the camping area for an interview earlier, but he "happened" to be there while on 26 June a State Commission was holding a "surprise check-up" on the activity of the camp. "How could Pitirimov hold the camp in such conditions when he had received so much finance," asks the author. A state inspection had earlier concluded that "the resort area is not fit for children to rest," he reports, "because of which all activity in the resort area was suspended." "But apparently Mr Dmitri Pitirimov is neither afraid of the authorities, nor the devil, nor God. Despite the suspension, a new group of children had come there to rest, when the authorities decided to do the surprise check-up. The fact is that Pitirimov has totally ignored the official demands."

The author then concludes that "in Uzbekistan, optimal conditions have been created for representatives of various faiths, who live in peace and accord. However, the concept of freedom does not mean that a 'paradise' will be created here [Uzbekistan] for all kinds of missionaries, no matter what they propagate, protestant or other teachings, who draw the youth of this country into their ranks by deceitful ways. Parents also need to be vigilant so their children do not fall under the influence of such missionaries."

Pastor Pitirimov told Forum 18 on 26 July that he was indeed in charge of the camp and was aware of the article. However, he did not know the author. "I or no one else from the Union has ever been interviewed by anyone named Karimov," he stressed. But he remembered that "someone" was actively taking pictures during the "surprise check-up" on 26 June.

Pitirimov categorically denied the allegations in the article. "I have not received any very large contributions for the camp let alone such a huge amount of money," he stated. "We are taking excellent care of children in our camp, and follow all the sanitary-hygiene rules."

However, he confirmed that there was a state inspection earlier in May, which had indicated to him a few shortcomings in the area of fire-prevention. "We had gathered some volunteers from among some young adults to help us to correct that on 26 June, when the authorities paid us a surprise visit." he said, "At that time not everything which needed to be corrected was ready," Pitirimov added.

Pitirimov categorically stated that: "All the parents whose children attend our summer camp know that we are Baptists, and they sign an agreement with us to allow their children to be taught at our camp." Pitirimov said that usually the children of Baptist church members are the children who attend the camp. "In the case of the boy mentioned in the article, his mother has not become a member but attends our church, and knows very well who we are and what we believe."

He also commented that he "would not be surprised to find that the mother was compelled to sign a complaint against the Baptist Union." "Some other Baptist parents were also summoned for questioning at the Prosecutor's office where they were told to sign complaints against us but they have refused to do so."

The authorities have bullied and harassed schoolchildren who attend places of worship – including mosques and Christian churches – as well as their parents elsewhere in Uzbekistan. The mass media has been used as part of this. Similarly, state TV has also been used by the authorities to encourage intolerance of freedom of religion and belief and to encourage religious hatred and intolerance.

Forum 18 has made repeated efforts between 21-28 July to speak to "Karimov" or anyone else from the Gorizont news agency. No contact phone numbers are available and there has been no reply to a written request from Forum 18 through the feedback form on their website. Uzreport.com, which is associated with Gorizont.uz, told Forum 18 that they did not recognise a reporter called "Karimov". They also could not arrange for Forum 18 to talk with the author of article. "They do not give interviews over the phone, we have been told. You can only contact them through their website," Forum 18 was told by Uzreport.com on 21 July.

Prisoners' freedom of religion or belief denied

By Felix Corley,

Forum 18 (17.07.2009) / HRWF (18.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Prisoners in Uzbekistan continue to be denied their right to freedom of religion or belief – for example to be able to pray visibly, to have religious literature of their own or to receive visits from religious representatives. Prisoners are often punished for offending prison administrations by visible religious activity, religious believers and human rights defenders have told Forum 18 News Service from Uzbekistan. Officials are reluctant to discuss the issue, but insisted to Forum 18 that prisoners' freedom of religion or belief is not restricted. Such claims are also contained in Uzbekistan's report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which is due to be considered by the Committee in Geneva on 27 July.

The Uzbek government report – which was submitted to the United Nations on 21 March 2008 and made public by the UN on 4 June 2008 (UN reference CCPR/C/UZB/3) – is on how Uzbekistan claims it is implementing its commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The report includes a number of errors over the size of fines for religious activity, failing to take account of ten-fold increases in 2006.

The ICCPR, which Uzbekistan ratified in 1996, states that, "All persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person" (Article 10, Paragraph 1). This specifically includes those held in prisons, detention camps or correctional institutions (General Comment 21 on the same article).

Among the other relevant UN standards is the 1955 Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, which state: "Access to a qualified representative of any religion shall not be refused to any prisoner" (Rule 41, Part 3). The regulations also stipulate that, "So far as practicable, every prisoner shall be allowed to satisfy the needs of his/her religious life by attending the services provided in the institution and having in his/her possession the books of religious observance and instruction of his/her denomination" (Rule 42).

Uzbekistan has imprisoned and continues to hold prisoners of conscience for their peaceful religious activity. These have included Muslims, Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses. Most recently, the authorities have targeted followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, with at least 25 people receiving sentences in the past year totalling some 200 years.

In addition to these religious prisoners of conscience are a much larger group of prisoners numbering up to about 8,000, who have been handed long sentences on wide-ranging charges of belonging to illegal, religious extremist organisations or calling for the overthrow of the state. Human rights defenders insist many of the cases are fabricated. Many of these prisoners are Muslims, but it very often remains unclear whether they have been punished for peaceful religious activity, for peaceful anti-government political activity, or for other reasons.

Bland official assurances

Officials appeared reluctant to discuss the freedom of religion or belief of prisoners with Forum 18. Officials at the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments – which has responsibility for prisons – told Forum 18 on 16 July that its head, Abdukarim Shodiev, was not in the office.

One of his deputies, Bahram Arafat, insisted to Forum 18 that prisoners "can practice their faith", but repeatedly refused to discuss specific complaints that prisoners have been punished for praying and fasting, and have been denied access to clergy and religious literature. "Talk to the Foreign Ministry," he told Forum 18. Told that his Directorate has responsibility for prisons, not the Foreign Ministry, he then handed Forum 18 over to Aziza Penjaeva, head of the International Department.

Penjaeva repeated Arafat's bland assurance. "We do everything in accordance with the law and in accordance with the Criminal Enforcement Code," she told Forum 18. "Everything the Code says on this is carried out."

Saidbahrom Gulyamov, head of the international department at the state-controlled Muslim Board in Tashkent, also gave a problem-free picture, insisting to Forum 18 on 14 July that prisoners can have religious literature, receive visits from imams and pray freely in prison.

Punished for praying

Surat Ikramov, a Tashkent-based human rights defender, says prisoners – particularly those sentenced for "religious offences" – are often punished for religious activity in prison. "If they pray in prison officials say this is a violation of the prison regime," he told Forum 18 on 14 July. "Those who read the namaz [Muslim prayer] are punished."

Ikramov cites examples of those he says have been punished for religious activity in prison, including Amangeldi Zulpakharov, a Muslim from Tashkent Region who has been imprisoned since 1999.

Zulpakharov's wife Urazgul travelled to the strict regime labour camp 64/51 in the town of Koson in Bukhara [Bukhoro] Region in April 2009, but was refused a meeting with him, Ikramov declared. Camp officials had subjected Zulpakharov to "brutal torture" in March 2009 to punish him for praying the namaz and had sent him to the punishment isolation cell. Ikramov said the man's hands and collar-bone had been broken as a result of the torture.

Urazgul Zulpakharova appealed to the camp administration, but they threatened her not to take her complaints further. Local police where she lives followed up with the same threats. Ikramov describes her as being "in despair".

Ikramov complains that the administration of the camp ordered the guards in September 2008 to beat all those in the prison sentenced under religious extremism charges for reading the namaz during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. He added that on 18 March 2009, ahead of the spring festival of Novruz, such prisoners were ordered into the yard of the camp where they were harshly beaten. He said one of these prisoners, Botir Abdukosimov, was hit so hard on the larynx that he could not breathe and lost consciousness.

In 2006, the wife of a Muslim prisoner punished for the "offence" of praying complained to labour camp governor Mukhiddin Abdullayev, who explained to her that prisoners in his labour camp are "categorically forbidden" to say prayers. She added that other prisoners have been beaten to force them to renounce their Muslim faith. Farukh Mukhammedov, the then head of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, claimed to Forum 18 that prisoners who wish to recite the Muslim prayers at dawn (currently banned) are allowed by their faith to postpone these prayers.

The government's then senior religious affairs official, Shoazim Minovarov, admitted to Forum 18 that the problem exists. He said they would discuss it with the Directorate "and find a solution which will be acceptable to prisoners".

In the wake of his sentencing while he was being held ahead of his unsuccessful appeal against his four year sentence for his religious activity, Protestant prisoner of conscience Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, was banned by the prison governor from kneeling to.

Told that Forum 18 has received repeated reports over many years of denial of access to clergy and religious literature and beatings and other punishments for visible prayer or fasting by prisoners, Penjaeva of the Interior Ministry Directorate retorted: "Beatings for praying? This can't be. You've just been told this, but you've not seen it – you should see the situation for yourself." Asked whether journalists can freely visit prisons and speak individually to prisoners, she claimed: "There is access to prisons for foreign journalists via the Foreign Ministry, if you are accredited here."

The official who answered the telephone on 16 July at the government-sponsored National Human Rights Centre of Uzbekistan told Forum 18 its head, Akmal Saidov, was not in the office. The official – who would not give his name, merely describing himself as Saidov's assistant – confirmed that the Centre had coordinated all the work on the report to the UN.

Asked about the frequent reports of prisoners being beaten or punished in other ways for practicing their faith, the official responded: "Where do you get this information? I strongly recommend you to deal with information from official sources. You could so easily get wrong information and get confused."

Told that Forum 18 had received frequent such reports from religious communities and human rights defenders over many years, especially over beatings of Muslim prisoners

who wished to pray and fast during Ramadan, the official responded: "I don't possess this information. We would know if there were cases of prisoners being beaten for praying in Ramadan. It's not true."

Ikrom Saipov, the head of the department that handles individual complaints at the Human Rights Centre, insisted to Forum 18 the same day that "of course" prisoners have the right to pray "as long as they fulfil the internal regulations that govern behaviour". "If they don't violate the regulations, they can undertake this."

Asked about reports of Muslims being punished for praying in prison, especially in Ramadan, Gulyamov of the Muslim Board responded: "I've not heard such things – we have no information on this."

Will Human Rights Centre protect prisoners punished for praying?

Told of the frequent punishments imposed on prisoners who pray visibly, Saipov of the government's Human Rights Centre responded: "I don't know of such cases – no one appealed to us, and I'm head of the department that receives such appeals."

Forum 18 told him of the punishment imposed on Zulpakharov and other prisoners at the camp in Koson in Bukhara Region. "His relatives could appeal to us under the procedure and we will check out their appeal and reach our conclusion," he told Forum 18. "If appropriate, we will go to the Interior Ministry or the Prosecutor's Office. If anyone exceeded their powers by obstructing people from praying, they should answer before the law. Whether a citizen or an official, anyone who violates the law should be punished. If I got such a complaint I would deal with it personally at once."

Saipov said that over the years his office has received complaints of other religious freedom violations. "Within the bounds of our powers, we helped them," he told Forum 18. "We instructed the relevant government bodies responsible in writing to resolve the issue." Asked what such complaints were about and how frequently they reached his department, he said he could not remember.

Can prisoners have religious literature?

Human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18 prisoners are generally allowed no religious books, including the Koran or the Bible.

The same prison governor who banned Protestant Pastor Shestakov from kneeling to pray also ordered the confiscation of his copy of the New Testament confiscated. Forum 18 found that he was offered the Koran to read instead.

Yet Gulyamov of the state-controlled Muslim Board in Tashkent claimed that imams visiting prisons can bring copies of the Koran for prisoners "without obstacle". An official of the Board in Khorezm Region told Forum 18 that prisoners can read the Koran in the prison library.

Asked by Forum 18 why those arrested have religious literature confiscated and why many prisoners have complained about denial of access to religious literature during their imprisonment, Penjaeva of the Interior Ministry Directorate responded: "Of course they can have it. It is available in prison libraries and they can freely go and read it. And of course they can have a personal Koran or Bible."

Saipov of the government Human Rights Centre insisted to Forum 18 that prisoners can have and use their own Koran or Bible or other personal religious literature, though "only books approved by the Religious Affairs Committee".

Can prisoners receive religious visits?

The two religious communities the government regards as the main "traditional" faiths – the state-controlled Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church – appear in practice to have only limited access to prisoners. Other faiths told Forum 18 they have almost no access.

Forum 18 spoke in mid-July to Muslim Board representatives in eight of Uzbekistan's fourteen Regions. Only three – in Fergana [Farghona], Khorezm and at the headquarters in Tashkent – were prepared to discuss the issue. Two of the others referred Forum 18 to the headquarters in Tashkent, refusing to say what access imams have locally to prisoners. One other referred Forum 18 to the Interior Ministry. The rest refused to discuss the issue.

Mufti Yusuf Burhan told Forum 18 from Fergana that it is possible for imams to visit prisons if they get permission from the head of the prison. "I have never been though and I don't know the last time anyone went."

Only in Khorezm Region did a local Muslim Board official say such visits happen. "This year several such visits took place, twice this month in Urgench." However, the official said the prison administration organises these visits, holding one big meeting for prisoners. "Sometimes the imam can speak to prisoners individually, but not independently." Asked if a prison ever gets in contact to say a prisoner wishes for an imam to visit, the official responded: "Not that I can recall."

Gulyamov of the Muslim Board in Tashkent claimed to Forum 18 that imams can visit prisons freely, talk to prisoners individually and in groups and bring in Korans. He said each Tashkent Region prison had received a visit from an imam three or four times this year. He said the Muslim Board has no special department handling religious work among prisoners.

Fr Igor Balukhachin of the Russian Orthodox diocese in Tashkent told Forum 18 on 16 July that priests can only visit prisoners when they get a specific request sent on by the Interior Ministry Directorate. "We can't go in as of ourselves." Told that in Russia the Orthodox Church frequently organises services in prisons, Fr Balukhachin declared: "The situation here is a bit different."

He admitted that visits as a result of such requests "do not happen often". "There were none this year or last. In 2007, I personally went to one prison in Tashkent."

Another Orthodox official in Tashkent told Forum 18 that he recalled baptisms of individual prisoners in the 1990s, but not now. He added that sometimes visits can be undertaken if relatives tell the church and the church appeals to the Interior Ministry. "Such appeals are never refused."

Penjaeva of the Interior Ministry Directorate told Forum 18 that each quarter a plan is drawn up for visits to prisons by imams "in accordance with procedure". She declined to say how often an imam might visit each individual prison, whether once they are there they have private access to individual prisoners, or whether the imam can lead communal prayers in the prison. She also would not say whether clergy of other faiths – such as Russian Orthodox priests, Protestant pastors or representatives of other faiths – have the right to conduct such visits.

Asked how prison administrations handle requests by individual prisoners for a visit by clergy, Penjaeva said prisoners write a request to the head of the prison, who sends on the correspondence to her Directorate. "We decide this here in Tashkent. We often get such appeals." Asked how many such appeals have been received this year and how

many of them were approved, Penjaeva retorted: "I don't have the right to give you such details" and put the phone down.

Asked about whether prisoners can have visits from clergy, Saipov of the government's Human Rights Centre said he did not know.

Religious prisoners singled out

Newly-arrived prisoners are forced to write a statement declaring that they "with a pure heart repent of the crimes they have committed against Uzbekistan" as well as renouncing their membership of "banned religious organisations."

This term is used to refer to not only the banned Islamist political movement Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the terrorist group the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, but also to any other religious group the government does not like. After writing this statement, a prisoner is then forced to stand in front of the other prisoners on the parade ground to repeat their renunciation of membership of such groups in front of other prisoners sentenced for "religious" offences.

Former prisoners say that those sentenced on charges of "religious extremism" (such as Pastor Shestakov) are held separately. They are allocated the heaviest and most dangerous work.

What Uzbekistan told the United Nations

In its report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the Uzbek government claimed that "considerable attention is given to exercise of the right to freedom of conscience by convicted prisoners".

The report points to Article 12 of the 1997 Criminal Enforcement Code, which proclaims that "those sentenced are guaranteed freedom of conscience. They have the right to profess any religious or none." It declares that prisoners have the right to invite clergy of state registered religious organisations, conduct religious rituals and use "objects of worship and religious literature". It adds that any such religious rituals should not break "the rules of internal order of the institution carrying out the punishment" or "harm the rights and legal interests of others".

Strangely, the Uzbek government report claims this is a "new article" added to the Code, even though it has been present since 1997. The only change since its adoption was the removal of one clause of Article 12 of the original 1997 version of the Code which guaranteed the rights of those sentenced to death to carry out "the necessary religious rituals in the given situation with the invitation of a religious servant" before the sentence was carried out. This clause was removed after the abolition of the death penalty in Uzbekistan in January 2008.

However, before the death penalty was abolished, death row prisoners who wished to have access to clergy before their execution were almost always denied this.

Yet the freedom of religion or belief of former death-row prisoners are highly unlikely to have improved since their transfer to life or very long sentences. Human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18 they were transferred to a separate new closed prison near the notorious labour camp at Jaslyk in Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston]. "The 200 or so prisoners have only highly restricted access to their families and the Red Cross is allowed no access. I doubt conditions for practising their faith are any easier."

Asked whether this Article of the Code is enforced, Ikramov responded decisively: "Absolutely not! The Code should be enforced on this and on many other points, but it isn't."

Banned from meeting fellow-believers

By Mushfig Bayram and Felix Corley

Forum 18 (07.07.2009) / HRWF (08.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Gafur Yusupov, who lives in a home for people with disabilities in eastern Uzbekistan, has been banned from attending his Baptist Church, Forum 18 News Service has learned. All his Christian books and audio tapes have also been taken from him, and he has been banned from having any contact with his fellow believers. When Baptists complained, the home told them to talk to the NSS secret police. Asked by what authority the home did this, its director Tahir Gaziev replied: "We have asked the Baptists to show us an official document that says they are allowed to invite people to their meetings. Only after they show us such a document will we allow him [Yusupov] to attend." When Forum 18 asked why Yusupov is not allowed to decide this himself, Gaziev put the phone down. In a separate case, the family of Protestants punished for "illegal" religious activity have been threatened with administrative or criminal charges and 15-days detention if they carry on protesting about the punishment. Asked why the family were threatened, District Police Chief Izzat Yusupov replied: "You are Forum 18 and I am Barack Obama", before he hung up the phone.

Gafur Yusupov, who lives in a home for people with disabilities in the city of Fergana [Farghona] in eastern Uzbekistan, has been banned from attending the Baptist Church of which he is a member, Baptists have complained to Forum 18 News Service. The home's director, Tahir Gaziev, also banned him from having any contact with his fellow believers. All Yusupov's Christian books and audio-tapes were also taken from him, Baptists also complained. Gaziev defended his actions to Forum 18.

The isolation of Yusupov from his fellow-believers comes as the Uzbek authorities continue to harass and raid religious communities of all faiths, imprison and fine individual believers, and confiscate and destroy religious literature. "We will continue to fine you and burn your literature," one police officer in the capital Tashkent told local Baptists.

Some of the fines handed down so far in 2009 for unapproved religious activity have been as much as 100 times the minimum monthly wage.

The Uzbek authorities have imprisoned many people for practising their faith. A total of 25 followers of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi have so far in 2009 been given almost 200 years in jail, Forum 18 notes. Among other prisoners of conscience still serving sentences are a Pentecostal pastor from Andijan [Andijon] in eastern Uzbekistan, Dmitry Shestakov, who is serving a four year sentence, and three Jehovah's Witnesses: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, and Olim Turaev.

Banned from meeting his fellow-believers

Yusupov, who has no legs, lives in Sakhovat Uyi (Grace Home) in Fergana. The congregation Yusupov belongs to is part of the Baptist Council of Churches. Their congregations refuse to register with the state, arguing that registration represents unacceptable state interference in their activity. They also point out that Uzbekistan's Constitution guarantees them the right to practice their faith freely.

Over the last few years, church members would take Yusupov to Sunday services in a wheel-chair. Now he is even banned from coming to the gates of the home to talk to church members who try to visit him. When they complained about this, the administration of the home told the Baptists to talk to the National Security Service (NSS) secret police. "Please, ask them. If they allow you to meet, we will not be against it."

Gaziev, Director of Sakhovat Uyi, confirmed that he prohibited Yusupov from attending the Baptist Church. "Gafur was distributing religious literature here [in the home]," he told Forum 18 on 1 June.

Asked whether he had the authority to ban Yusupov from any contact with his religious community, Gaziev responded: "We have asked the Baptists to show us an official document that says they are allowed to invite people to their meetings. Only after they show us such a document will we allow him [Yusupov] to attend." When Forum 18 asked why Yusupov is not allowed to make the decision for himself, Gaziev put the phone down. Called back later, his secretary said Gaziev was not available to talk.

Local Baptists told Forum 18 on 26 June that Yusupov is still not being allowed any contact with his fellow Baptists.

Tashkent Baptist fines

Three Baptists, Lidiya Markelova, Oksana Usmanova and Albina Akhmadieva, were each fined 280,400 Soms (1,205 Norwegian Kroner, 133 Euros or 187 US Dollars) by a Tashkent court on 4 June, local Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 27 June. The three women were accused of distributing Christian books and leaflets. The court ordered that the Uzbek-language literature confiscated from them be destroyed. Russian-language books and leaflets were ordered to be handed over to the government's Religious Affairs Committee.

The three women were forced to go to the police station on 24 May, after police stopped them from offering Christian literature to passers-by on the street in the city's Hamza District. Local Baptists quote police officer Sabir Isaakov as telling the women: "You are not registered. We have banned you from going out with libraries, yet you still go out and agitate among the people. That's why we will continue to fine you and burn your literature."

While the three women were being held at the local police station, members of their church gathered outside to try to find out what was happening. They sang hymns and gave out Christian literature.

Local Baptists told Forum 18 they are calling for prayer for the fines to be overturned, the confiscated literature to be returned and for "the believers to be able to conduct their mobile Christian library service without obstruction".

In a separate case, on 9 June Judge D. Valiev of Tashkent's Hamza District Criminal Court fined Vladimir Musatov 280,400 Soms (1,205 Norwegian Kroner, 133 Euros or 187 US Dollars) for distributing religious books and leaflets of a "missionary nature", Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18. At the same trial, fellow Baptist Lidiya Guseva was fined half that amount. Judge Valiev ordered to transfer the confiscated Russian-language literature to the Religious Affairs Committee and to destroy the Uzbek-language literature.

The literature was confiscated from Musatov and Guseva on 31 May, while they were offering it to passers-by on the street, Baptists told Forum 18. The Religious Affairs Committee provided the court with an "expert analysis" on 2 June that the books and

leaflets are of a "missionary nature", and therefore their import into and distribution in Uzbekistan is banned.

Judge Valiev (who did not give his first name) refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 25 June. "If they don't like the decision they can file a complaint," he said. Asked whether distributing religious literature is banned in Uzbekistan, he responded, "I will not tell you that. I will not give you any information over the phone." He then put the phone down.

Protestant family harassed in Andijan Region

Andijan Region's Jalakuduk District authorities have threatened family members of Mahmudjon Boynazarov, a member of an unregistered Protestant Church in the town of Kurgantepe, Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals from the authorities told Forum 18.

Boynazarov was one of three Protestants sentenced to 15-day jail terms on 3 March after police raided a meal in a private home in the town. Together with Mahmudjon Turdiev and Ravshanjon Bahramov, Boynazarov was found guilty of violating Article 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes violating the procedure for teaching religious doctrines.

On 19 March Andijan Regional Appeal Court, in the absence of Turdiev and Boynazarov, rejected their appeal and upheld the original court decision. The two then wrote complaints to various authorities, Protestants told Forum 18.

Boynazarov's brothers, sisters and elderly mother have been summoned to the committee of their mahalla (local town district). There they were pressured by District Prosecutor's Office officials to stop complaining against the court decision and the local Police, Protestants told Forum 18.

Izzat Yusupov, Chief of Jalakuduk District Police, also warned Boynazarov's family members that they could face administrative charges, 15-day administrative detention, and even criminal charges if they continued. Official warnings were issued against Mahmudjon himself, three sisters Rahima, Gulchohra and Gulnoro Boynazarov, and his wife Matlube. Boynazarov refused to sign the warning, saying it was unlawful.

In addition, Jalakuduk District Police officers "unlawfully" harassed Boynazarov's 16-year-old son Oybek, who studies at a local college, Protestants complained to Forum 18. In particular, a police crime prevention inspector reportedly instructed the student head of their group to report on Oybek's actions while in the college.

Abduvahid Kadyrov of Jalakuduk District Prosecutor's Office denied that they had anything to do with the Boynazarov family. He told Forum 18 on 1 June that the Boynazarovs had been summoned not to the Prosecutor's Office but to the District Police Office.

District Police Chief Yusupov refused to tell Forum 18 on 1 June why he had threatened the Boynazarov family, claiming that the telephone line was bad. Reached again on 26 June, Forum 18 again introduced itself and asked why the family has been threatened. "You are Forum 18 and I am Barack Obama," he responded and hung up the phone.

Another two Baptists fined in Fergana

On 29 March Artur Alpaev and Vadim Bakeev, members of the Council of Churches Baptist Church of Fergana, were visiting Fergana Region's Oltiaryk District to share their faith with local people and offer them Christian books free of charge. Police Inspector

Mahmudov (his first name unknown) stopped them after they managed to talk to a few people. He detained the two men and brought them to the District Police Station, where officers confiscated five booklets from them. Alpaev and Bakeev were released after official records were drawn up.

On 12 April the two were again stopped by the Police in Oltiaryk District when they returned there to invite people to the church for its Easter celebration (marked on 19 April). This time they were taken to the Fergana Regional Police Department, where Anti-terrorist Police questioned them.

On 5 May Alpaev and Bakeev were summoned to Oltiaryk District Court. When the Judge found out that Alpaev had been detained three times for the same "violation", he referred the case to the District Prosecutor's Office for a criminal case to be filed against the two Protestants.

An official of the Oltiaryk District Prosecutor's Office (who did not give his name) told Forum 18 on 25 June that the Prosecutor filed an administrative case against the two some time ago, and the Court "already two weeks ago" gave a fine to both. He said he did not know how big the fines were.

The Oltiaryk Court told Forum 18 on 25 June that Judge Altanov (his first name was not given) tried the case. Asked about the details of the fine, the Court official, who did not give her name, refused to discuss the case further and put the phone down. Forum 18 was not able to reach Judge Altanov on 25 and 26 June.

New raid on Mubarek Baptists

The Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the town of Mubarek in the Kashkadarya Region of southern Uzbekistan, which has only 10 adult members, has again faced a raid. The church was several times harassed by the local authorities in 2008, with fines being handed down for unregistered worship and warnings that children who attended would be imprisoned.

Mid-morning on 10 May, during the congregation's Sunday service, the home of Vladimir Khanyukov was raided by eight plain clothes Police officers. The officers claimed that they were conducting a routine passport "check-up". Despite the Baptists' insistence, only one officer, Rustam Nursaidov, showed his identity document.

Without warrants, the officers confiscated three hymn-books, several Christian calendars and leaflets. They also demanded all those present to hand over their hymn-books. In the course of the two-hour raid, the officers filmed those present on video-camera and cell phones, as well as taking photographs of the children. Then they made official records of all the people present. The officers left without telling church members of the contents of the records.

Meanwhile, Greater Grace Protestant Church in the central city of Samarkand [Samarqand] is still unable to meet for worship after it was twice warned by the local Police. "We are afraid to meet in people's homes," one member told Forum 18 on 26 June.

Police and the NSS secret police raided the church on 1 April, as a result of which it lost its place for holding Sunday services and Bible classes.

Enormous fines for religious activity continue

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (08.06.2009) / HRWF (11.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Courts in Uzbekistan have continued giving enormous fines to religious believers, Forum 18 News Service has learned. In total, 33 people are known to have each been fined up to 100 times the minimum monthly salary in April and May. The fines were imposed by courts in Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital, Nukus, the central city of the north-western Karakalpakstan [Qorolpoghiston] region, and Samarkand [Samarqand] in south-central Uzbekistan. However, in one case a court near Tashkent substantially reduced - by a factor of ten - fines given to six members of an unregistered Baptist congregation down to five times the minimum monthly salary. Attacks on people possessing religious literature have also continued. Protestants, whose Bibles were ordered to be destroyed by a court in Samarkand, complained to Forum 18 that they "felt insulted" by the Judge's order.

Begzot Kadyrov, Deputy Head of the state Religious Affairs Committee refused to comment on any of the cases. "There's no point in calling us," he told Forum 18 on 3 June. "We will not answer you. No one from the Committee will answer you either. You need to get accreditation from the Foreign Ministry." All other numbers at the Committee went unanswered on 3 June.

The latest court actions come amid a growing crackdown on people exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. Recent appeals by nine Muslim prisoners of conscience against their harsh jail terms have been rejected, Ikrom Merajov and eight others having been sentenced to jail terms of between nine and five and a half years.

Enormous fines

Courts in Samarkand and Tashkent have imposed heavy fines on Protestants in three cases, the latest known to Forum 18 being on 29 May. Judge Nizamiddin Ernazarov of Samarkand City Criminal Court on 1 May fined three unregistered Protestant Christians. They were charged the Administrative Code's Article 184-2, which punishes illegal production, storage, import or dissemination of religious materials and Article 241, which punishes violation of the procedure for teaching religious doctrines.

The three were: Leysan Jurayeva and Khursid Umurzakov who were each fined 1,402,000 Soms (6,600 Norwegian Kroner, 745 Euros or 990 US Dollars), fifty times the minimum monthly salary, and Anzhela Daminova ten times the minimum monthly salary, or 280,400 Soms (1,320 Norwegian Kroner, 149 Euros or 198 US Dollars).

The minimum monthly salary in Uzbekistan is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (128 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). Most of the population is poor, and has to exist on incomes that are very low, so these fines are an enormous burden.

Judge Ernazarov's assistant, who would not give his name, said he knew of the case but could not comment. "Judge Ernazarov is busy hearing a case and cannot talk to you," he told Forum 18 on 3 June.

In another recent case, Tashkent City Criminal Court on 15 May fined Ilgiz Bikinin ten times the minimum monthly salary, or 280,400 Soms (1,320 Norwegian Kroner, 150 Euros or 198 US Dollars) and Vera Prokhorova five times the minimum monthly salary, 140,200 Soms respectively, local Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18. Council of Churches congregations refuse state registration as they believe it leads to unwarranted state interference in their activity.

It was not clear what the Baptists were charged with. The Head of Tashkent City Court's Chancellery told Forum 18 on 3 June that "everything is clearly written on their [Prohkorova and Bikinin's] copy of the court decision," and then refused to talk further.

In yet another case, nine Baptists were fined by Tashkent Region's Ahangaran District Criminal Court on 29 May. Judge A. Kadyrov fined Alexandr Brislavsky, Eynulla Mekhtiyev, Zoya Denisova and Valentina Muratova 80 times the minimum monthly salary each, and Yelena Starovoit, Larisa Shepelenko, Zoya Kuzmenyok, Tatyana Kuzmenyok and Larisa Krivobok were each fined the minimum monthly salary under the Administrative Code's Article 202-1, which punishes "inclination to participate in the activity of illegal social and religious organisations".

The court decision did not state what would become of confiscated literature, including one New Testament, a Gospel of Luke and several other Christian books.

Attacks on religious literature

In the first two cases, Uzbekistan demonstrated its continued hostility to people found with religious literature. In the cases of the massive Samarkand fines, Judge Ernazarov of Samarkand Criminal Court also ordered the destruction of four Bibles, one New Testament and Psalms, a book titled "Prayer Is Key to Awakening" in the Uzbek language, as well as 91 DVD and CD disks seized from the Protestants.

The Tashkent City Criminal Court also ordered the destruction of literature. Seven booklets were ordered to be destroyed, and 54 books and booklets were ordered to be handed to the state Religious Affairs Committee. The seven booklets were ordered to be destroyed as the Committee's "expert analysis" found that they "contained material of a missionary nature, because of which their import into and dissemination in Uzbekistan is banned." Such "expert analyses" are a routine part of Uzbekistan's extremely severe religious censorship regime.

Baptists complained to Forum 18 that the Religious Affairs Committee's "experts" stated that religious books can "only" be used within the confines of the registered religious communities. "Our believers are deprived of their right to hold any Christian literature in their homes," the Baptists complained.

Some fines reduced or cancelled

Despite the continuing imposition of heavy fines, in some cases appeals against fines have resulted in a reduction – although the reduced fines are still large. Judge Mansur Musaev of Tashkent City's Mirza-Ulugbek District Criminal Court heard several appeal cases in late April and May filed by Protestant Christians given very large fines by the same court. The fines varied between 50 and 100 times the minimal monthly salary, and were imposed on 14 people. Judge Musaev reduced one fine and cancelled another, but upheld the other twelve fines. Forum 18 tried to find out the reasons for the fines, but Judge Musaev said through his secretary Timur (who did not give his last name) that he did not want to comment on any of those cases.

Asked by Forum 18 on 2 June how people could afford to pay such huge fines, Timur responded: "The Court fined them according to the law." Asked why one of the fines was reduced and another cancelled, he said: "We took into account the individuals' financial status and age." Timur then declined to speak further to Forum 18.

Six members of the officially registered Baptist Church of Mirza-Ulugbek District were given large fines under the Administrative Code's Article 201 part 1, which punishes violation of the procedure of arranging, holding of meetings, gatherings, street marches

or demonstrations. On 13 May Judge Musaev reduced the fine given to Tatyana Kim from 80 times the minimum monthly salary to 50 times the minimum monthly salary.

Three Protestants were on 13 April fined 100 times the minimum monthly salary. Judge Musaev on 30 April cancelled the fine given to Kibriyo Kamilova, and returned the other case files to court for further investigation.

On 29 May the same Judge Masaev halved the fine imposed on Anatasia Yudina of a registered Baptist congregation from 80 times the minimum monthly wage to 40 times. Yudina had been given the original fine on 27 April under Article 201 part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences. The same day he halved the fine imposed on another Protestant Natalya Kim on the same charge from 80 to 40 times the minimum monthly wage. Artur Kim had his fine reduced from 80 to 60 times the minimum monthly wage.

On 5 May, the Criminal Court of Almalyk [Olmalik] heard appeals against fines of fifty times the minimum monthly wage imposed on 13 members of an unregistered Council of Churches Baptist church. Fines imposed on six of the Baptists - Akhmedov, Shopova, Danilevsky, Shiryayev, Guseva and Struchaeva - were reduced to five times the minimum monthly salary "taking into account their marital and financial status and their age."

However, not all appeals are successful. Judge Sagdulla Ashirmatov of Mirza-Ulugbek District Court imposed fines on five charismatic Protestants in two different cases on 13 April, under the Administrative Code's Article 201 part 1 and Article 240, which punishes violation of the Religion Law. Andrey Kim was fined ten times the minimum monthly salary, and Herman Tsoy, Tamara Magay, Yuliya Mun and Sanobar Khydyrova were fined 80 times the minimum monthly salary, a Protestant who wanted to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. On 5 May, Judge Musaev upheld the fines in an appeal case lodged by Kim and Khydyrova.

All the judges in these cases refused to discuss the cases with Forum 18. Judge Noyobov, for example, told Forum 18 on 3 June that "If you came to my office I could talk to you," but then put the phone down. Judge Bazarov's secretary, who did not give his name, repeatedly asked Forum 18 to call back later for two days on 3 and 4 June. Finally, he claimed that "the Judge is busy, and cannot talk to you" on 4 June.

One exit denial overturned

While a number of active religious believers of a number of faiths have been denied the exit visa they need every two years to be allowed to leave Uzbekistan, Natalya Kadyrova, the wife of the pastor of a Protestant congregation in Tashkent, finally received her exit visa in April, Forum 18 has learnt. Kadyrova lodged her application at the Department of Entry, Exit and Legalisation of Citizenship in December 2008 and lodged official protests after her application was denied.

Appeals by prisoners of conscience rejected

By Felix Corley and Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (02.06.2009) / HRWF (09.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Uzbekistan has rejected appeals by nine Muslim prisoners of conscience against their harsh jail terms, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Ikrom Merajov and eight other followers of the approach of theologian Said Nursi had their sentences confirmed on 2 June. Merajov was in April given nine years in jail, with terms of between five and a half years and six years imposed on the others. 25 Nursi-related prisoners of

conscience have so far in 2009 been given almost 200 years in jail. Merajov's brother Ilhom told Forum 18 that "no proof of any guilt was presented in court" and that written verdicts have not been given to the nine prisoners of conscience and their lawyers. An appeal to the Supreme Court is being prepared. Meanwhile, a Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience, Irfon Khamidov, has been freed at the end of his sentence but almost immediately deported to Tajikistan. He was allowed to see his two-year-old son for the first time for one night only. Short-term imprisonments for up to 15 days and massive fines continue to be used to punish Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses. No state officials were willing to discuss the cases with Forum 18.

Appeals by Ikrom Merajov and eight other followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi against their harsh jail sentences were rejected by Bukhara [Bukhoro] Regional Criminal Court on 2 June, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Merajov's original sentence of nine years' imprisonment was upheld, as were the sentences of between five and a half years and six years imposed on the others. Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov, who was freed on 14 May after two years in jail for teaching religion, was deported to his native Tajikistan the following day, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. During the one night he had at home after getting out of jail before being deported, he saw his two-year-old son for the first time.

Begzot Kadyrov, Deputy Chair of the state Religious Affairs Committee refused to answer any questions about these cases on 3 June. "No one else from the Committee will answer you either," he told Forum 18 before putting the phone down. Calls to other numbers at the Committee went unanswered.

No-one from the Bukhara Regional Criminal Court would comment on the Nursi-related cases. Nasriev (he did not give his first name), the Secretary of the Panel of Judges of the Regional Court, said he knew of the case but did not want to comment. "It is not in my competence to answer your questions," he told Forum 18 on 4 June. He then referred Forum 18 to Feruz (the last name was not given), the Secretary of the Court's Chair. Feruz did not want to comment and referred Forum 18 to the Chancellery of the Court. Calls to the Chancellery went unanswered on 4 June.

Merajov and his colleagues were tried and sentenced on 29 April at Bukhara Regional Criminal Court. Of the other defendants, Muzaffar Allayorov, Botir Tukhtamuradov, Shuhrat Karimov, Salohiddin Kosimov and Yadgar (last name unknown) were each given six year terms of imprisonment. The other three, Bobomurod Sanoev, Jamshid Ramazonov and Alisher Jumaev, received sentences of five and a half years' imprisonment each. After the trial the nine prisoners of conscience were held in prison in Bukhara.

Ikrom Merajov's brother Ilhom, who now lives in Russia, said that at the appeal hearing the young men and their lawyers established the nine men's innocence. "No proof of any guilt was presented in court," he told Forum 18 on 3 June. "Ikrom asked them to bring the books that they found in our family home and show which pages contain anti-government and extremist statements, bring the discs and his papers and show where there is something wrong." Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18 that the judges – Komilov, Mirzoev and Toshev (first names unknown) - "had no response to that".

Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18 that the nine men are still being held in Bukhara. He said they intend to lodge a further appeal in Uzbekistan's Supreme Court. He also pointed out that the written verdicts from the original trial of 29 April have never been given to the nine prisoners of conscience and their lawyers.

Other prisoners of conscience on grounds of freedom of religion or belief

The sentencing of Merajov and his eight colleagues brought to 25 times the number of followers of Said Nursi known to have been sentenced to long prison terms under various articles of the Criminal Code in 2009. The sentences total nearly 200 years' imprisonment.

Abdulaziz Dadahonov was among a group of residents of the capital Tashkent sentenced on 26 February. Forum 18 has learned that after his appeal against his eight-year sentence was rejected, he was transferred to serve his term in a labour camp in Navoi [Nawoiy].

Among other prisoners of conscience still serving sentences are a Pentecostal Pastor from Andijan [Andijon] in eastern Uzbekistan, Dmitry Shestakov, who is serving a four year sentence, and three Jehovah's Witnesses: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, and Olim Turaev.

Appeals against the convictions of the three Jehovah's Witnesses, and a formal request on their behalf to Uzbekistan's state Religious Affairs Committee for an amnesty have been unsuccessful. Lawyers for the three are preparing further appeals to the Supreme Court.

Prisoner of conscience released, then deported

Jehovah's Witness Irfon Khamidov was released on 14 May after completing two years' imprisonment, but was then deported to his native Tajikistan the following day, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. During the one night he had at home in Samarkand [Samarqand] after getting out of jail before being deported, he saw his two-year-old son for the first time. He was ordered to report to the police at 9.00 the following morning, who deported him that day to Tajikistan, the country of his citizenship.

Khamidov was sentenced in May 2007 for "illegal religious teaching". The Samarkand Jehovah's Witness community to which he belongs has been seeking state registration in vain for almost a decade.

Short term imprisonments for conscience

In addition to these long-term prisoners of conscience, the Uzbek authorities are increasingly using imprisonment for up to 15 days to punish members of minority religious communities. Four Protestants were so imprisoned in March, with three more been forcibly detained in a centre for the homeless.

Forum 18 has learned that five Jehovah's Witnesses have also been given short prison terms in 2009.

On 5 February, police in Tashkent's Yakkasarai District raided the Akhmedov family home, where three family members and four guests were present. Police officers interrogated the seven, and searched the flat. They confiscated several of the Akhmedovs' books, including the Jehovah's Witness Yearbook for 2005 and a copy of the Bible.

Six of those present faced trial at Yakkasarai District Court on 21 February under various Articles of the Code of Administrative Offences and all were found guilty, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. Dilshod Akhmedov was sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment. His mother Fatima Akhmedova and father Ilhamjan Akhmedov were each sentenced to ten days' imprisonment. The three were all given prison terms as they had already been sentenced under the Code of Administrative Offences. Fines imposed under separate Articles were subsumed into the prison terms and they did not have to pay them.

The other three defendants at the trial – Marzia Kucharova, Lidia Mullajanova and (in absentia) Gavkhar Khafizova – were each fined fifty times the minimum monthly wage, or 1,402,000 Soms (6,600 Norwegian Kroner, 745 Euros or 990 US Dollars) each.

The minimum monthly salary in Uzbekistan is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (128 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). The majority of Uzbekistan's population is poor, and has to exist on incomes that are very low, so the fine is an enormous amount.

Thirteen Baptists from Almalyk [Olmaliq] were also fined this enormous sum in April, after the police with a local Russian Orthodox priest, Father Igor Skorik, raided a Sunday morning worship service.

The verdict in the Jehovah's Witness trial reveals that the state Religious Affairs Committee provided the court with an "expert analysis" of two books confiscated from the Akhmedovs' flat – a book entitled "Revelation" and the Jehovah's Witness Yearbook 2005 – that the books had been produced by the Jehovah's Witnesses and "contain their ideas". The Committee insisted that such books were only for "internal use" of a registered Jehovah's Witness community. As the Jehovah's Witnesses have only one registered community in Uzbekistan – in the town of Chirchik – the Committee claimed these two books could only be used there. Such "expert analyses" are a routine part of Uzbekistan's extremely severe censorship regime.

All six appealed to the head of the Yakkasarai District Court, but on 25 February their appeal was rejected and their sentences upheld.

More raids on and fines for "illegal religious activity"

In a separate case, on 22 February six Jehovah's Witnesses were gathered at the Tashkent home of Galina Fris. Police officers gained entry to her flat by claiming that they were from the gas company. Police confiscated her religious literature.

According to the court verdict seen by Forum 18, Fris was found guilty by the Mirzo-Ulugbek District Court on 28 February of violating Article 201 part 1 and 202 of the Code of Administrative Offences. The court ruled that she had held an "illegal meeting" where "illegal religious activity" was taking place, an accusation she rejected. She was sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment. She was freed only once she had served the full sentence, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Like the other Tashkent Jehovah's Witnesses and the Almalyk Baptists, she was fined fifty times the minimum monthly wage, 1,402,000 Soms.

Also tried at the same hearing, according to the verdict, was Ayshe Setablaeva, who was found guilty of violating 201 part 1 and Article 240 part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences. She too was sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment. She was freed only once she had served the full sentence, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. She was also fined fifty times the minimum monthly wage, or 1,402,000 Soms.

The Jehovah's Witnesses point out that no "expert analysis" of the confiscated religious literature was provided to the court. Forum 18 notes that the authorities have this year been particularly hostile to people found with religious literature.

More severe jail sentences for Muslim prisoners of conscience

By Felix Corley and Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (29.04.2009) / HRWF (05.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Uzbekistan has today (29 April) imposed severe jail sentences on nine followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. In the fourth such trial this year, university lecturer Ikrom Merajov was given nine years' imprisonment. Of the other eight prisoners of conscience, Muzaffar Allayorov, Botir Tukhtamuradov, Shuhrat Karimov, Salohiddin Kosimov and Yadgar (last name unknown) were each given six year jail terms. Three - Bobomurod Sanoev, Jamshid Ramazonov and Alisher Jumaev - each received sentences of five and a half years in jail. "The Uzbek government shouldn't fear Muslims who pray regularly, read the Koran regularly and meet in homes regularly," Merajov's brother Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18. Officials have refused to discuss the harsh sentences with Forum 18. The sentences imposed today bring to 25 the number of Nursi-related prisoners of conscience known to have been convicted this year, with sentences totalling nearly 200 years' imprisonment. Further convictions are likely as cases against others continue.

In the fourth set of convictions in Uzbekistan so far this year of followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, Bukhara [Bukhoro] Regional Criminal Court today (29 April) handed down heavy terms of imprisonment on nine local Muslims, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. University lecturer Ikrom Merajov received the heaviest term, nine years' imprisonment, while the rest received sentences of between five and a half and six years' imprisonment. Families of the nine rejected the state's accusations the men were involved in any "illegal" activity. "The Uzbek government shouldn't fear Muslims who pray regularly, read the Koran regularly and meet in homes regularly," Merajov's brother Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18 on 29 April. Officials have refused to discuss the harsh sentences with Forum 18.

Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18 that of the other defendants, Muzaffar Allayorov, Botir Tukhtamuradov, Shuhrat Karimov, Salohiddin Kosimov and Yadgar (last name unknown) were each given six year terms of imprisonment. The other three, Bobomurod Sanoev, Jamshid Ramazonov and Alisher Jumaev, received sentences of five and a half years' imprisonment each. The prosecutor had demanded an 11-year sentence on Ikrom Merajov and eight year sentences for the other eight.

Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18 that the nine men were told the written verdicts would be issued on 2 May. He said all nine are set to lodge appeals against their convictions.

The sentences handed down in Bukhara bring to 25 the number of people known to have been convicted this year in Uzbekistan in Nursi-related prosecutions, with sentences totalling nearly 200 years' imprisonment. Further convictions are likely as cases against others continue.

Non-Nursi related religious prisoners of conscience

Among other religious prisoners of conscience still serving sentences are Pentecostal Pastor from Andijan in eastern Uzbekistan, Dmitry Shestakov, who is serving a four year sentence, and four Jehovah's Witnesses: Abdubannob Ahmedov, Sergei Ivanov, Irfon Khamidov and Olim Turaev.

Widespread official attacks on freedom of religion or belief

The campaign against Nursi followers since late 2008 has coincided with increased threats to children who attend places of worship, whether mosques, churches or temples. Also threatened have been parents who take their children to worship or who allow them to attend. Protestant Christian and Hare Krishna meetings have been raided in recent months. Protestants particularly face a wave of police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police raids, with heavy fines, detentions of up to 15 days, confiscations and

court-ordered destruction of religious literature and, in one recent case, a Kazakh citizen legally resident in Uzbekistan was summarily deported to Kazakhstan with no explanation.

Procedural violations at Bukhara trial?

Eight of the nine defendants were arrested in a police and NSS secret police raid on the Merajov family home in Bukhara on 22 December 2008. All eight were detained, though one, Jumaev, was freed in early January after 15 days' detention (apparently because he was younger) and awaited trial at home. Also detained during the raid was Abdurahmon Musaev, but he was freed after 15 days' detention and no charges were lodged against him.

Arrested a few days after the 22 December raid was Yadgar (last name unknown): he was among the eight defendants held in pre-trial detention for four months and has now been given a six year jail sentence.

The trial of the nine began at Bukhara Regional Criminal Court on 22 April under Judge Tursunbai Tangriyev. The nine faced accusations that they were allegedly involved in a "radical Turkish Muslim Nursi movement". Merajov was accused of violating Uzbekistan's Criminal Code Article 244-1 Part 3 Point A, which punishes "preparation or distribution of materials containing a threat to social security and social order" by a group or with foreign support, and Article 244-2 Part 1, which punishes "creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist or fundamentalist or other banned organisations". The other defendants faced similar charges.

Ilhom Merajov, the defendant's brother, told Forum 18 from Novosibirsk in Russia that the trial was open and the relatives of the accused were allowed to attend. However, he complained that defence requests for prosecution witnesses to be named and to attend court for questioning were rejected. "Their alleged testimony was simply read to the court anonymously and no possibility was given to challenge it," Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18.

Ilhom Merajov also complained that the defendants were never given the written indictments. "They were simply read out in the courtroom. This is a violation of procedure."

The man who answered Judge Tangriyev's telephone on 29 April told Forum 18 the judge was not there, adding that he was "just a citizen who happens to be in his office". Subsequent calls went unanswered.

The assistant to Bukhara Regional Prosecutor Ibadullo Nurov, who did not give his name, said he could not answer why Merajov and the other eight were so harshly punished by the court. "If you want to talk, come to our office," he told Forum 18 on 29 April.

Kayum Kholov, the official responsible for religious literature issues at the Regional Justice Department, refused to tell Forum 18 on 29 April whether Said Nursi's books are prohibited in Uzbekistan or why Merajov and his associates were punished by the court for reading and studying them together. As soon as Forum 18 finished the question he hung up. Several later calls went unanswered.

Other Nursi-related Muslim prisoners of conscience

The Bukhara trial and convictions were the latest in a wave of similar cases which began with arrests of Nursi followers across Uzbekistan in 2008.

A 16 February television programme broadcast on Uzbekistan's First Channel entitled "Light leading to darkness" said Tashkent City Criminal Court recently found eight "former members of the Nurcular sect" guilty of "preparing and distributing materials that pose threat to public security and order; setting up, leading and being involved in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist and other banned organisations". The eight - Eldor Shermatov, Anvar Sharipov, Jamshid Rasulov, Oktam Bekiev, Olimjon Musaev, Muzaffar Karimov, Sharofiddin Gofurov and Baht Abdugafforov - were given sentences of between six and a half and eight years' imprisonment.

The state-controlled mass media is often used to encourage intolerance of religious groups the government dislikes, and opposition to freedom of religion or belief.

On 26 February, Judge Farhod Yigitaliev of Tashkent Criminal Court imposed harsh prison sentences in the trial of five writers for the Islamic-inspired periodical "Irmoq" (Spring). Bakhrom Ibrahimov and Davron Kabilov received 12 year sentences in general regime labour camps; Rovshanbek Vafojev received a ten year general regime labour camp sentence; and Abdulaziz Dadahonov and Botyrbek Eshkuziyev each received eight year general regime labour camp sentences. All five were found guilty of violating Article 244-1 and Article 244-2 of the Criminal Code. Their appeals were rejected on 31 March.

On 6 April, Tashkent City Criminal Court led by Judge Mirzajanov (first name unknown) handed down eight-year prison sentences to Davron Tajiev, a correspondent of the newspaper "Yeti Iqlim" (Seven Climates), and Shavkat Ismoilov, an employee responsible for the paper's distribution. Sentenced to twelve years in prison in the same court hearing was Mammadali Shahobiddinov, a Muslim preacher from Namangan in the Fergana Valley in eastern Uzbekistan. All three were arrested on "suspicion of being sponsored by a Turkish radical religious movement Nursi".

Other Nursi-related prosecutions underway

Tashkent City Court also began the trial of four more Muslims - Ibrohim Khudoybergenov, Talat Pulatov, Jahongir Kurbonov and another unknown man - all of whom are suspected of having ties with the Nursi movement, Ezgulik told Forum 18.

Sources in Tashkent told Forum 18 on 29 April that the trial of the four men is continuing.

Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18 that cases are also underway against Nursi followers in Andijan. He expects trials to follow there soon.

New trial, long prison terms, heavy fines and deportation

By Mushfig Bayram,

Forum 18 (24.04.2009) / HRWF (27.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Four months after they were arrested in the central city of Bukhara [Bukhoro], the trial of ten men accused of being followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi began on 22 April, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The trial is part of a continuing crackdown on religious organisations and individual believers across Uzbekistan. In separate cases, two criminal courts in the capital Tashkent have handed down prison sentences on three Muslims of between eight and twelve years and enormous fines on Protestant Christians, and begun another trial against four more Muslims who were witnesses in a previous court case. Also in April, Rodion Sayfutdinov, a Protestant Christian, who holds Kazakh citizenship but who was officially registered to live in Tashkent, was detained, taken to the border and "dumped" in Kazakhstan with "no

money" on him, Protestants from Tashkent who wanted to remain unnamed told Forum 18.

Religious activity has been under very tight government control in Uzbekistan for more than a decade, but this control is now increasing. Muslim, Protestant Christian, Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna communities have particularly suffered in the latest official attacks, which have included raids, arrests, beatings, 15-day imprisonments, sentences of up to 12 years' imprisonment, confiscation and court-ordered destruction of religious literature, and deportations. Officials have refused to explain to Forum 18 why pressure on religious communities has stepped up.

Criminal trial of ten Muslims in Bukhara

The trial that began at Bukhara Regional Criminal Court on 22 April under Judge Tursunbai Tangriyev is of Ikrom Merajov, a University lecturer from Bukhara, and nine others allegedly involved in a "radical Turkish Muslim Nursi movement".

However, Judge Tangriyev insisted to Forum 18 on 23 April that the trial of Ikrom Merajov and the nine others had not begun and would start "next week". He refused to talk about the case. Yet his secretary (who did not give her name) said "perhaps" the hearing already started. Merajov's brother, Ilhom Merajov, who lives in Russia, told Forum 18 on 23 April that his mother and father "already participated" in the trial that started on 22 April.

On 22 December 2008, police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police burst into the Merajov family home in Bukhara. They arrested Merajov and eight other men: Muzaffar Allayorov, Botir Tukhtamurodov, Alisher Jumaev, Abdurahmon Musaev, Bobomurod Sanoev, Jamshid Ramazonov, Salohiddin Kosimov and Shuhrat Karimov. Religious books and other materials were confiscated in what the family insists was an "illegal" raid. The tenth man, Yadgar (family name unknown), was arrested several days later.

Bukhara Regional NSS Department also refused to talk about Merajov's case to Forum 18 on 23 April. When Forum 18 asked for Farhod Oltiyev, the NSS Investigator who supposedly led Merajov's case, the officer who answered the phone (he did not give his name) took down the name of Forum 18, and asked to wait on the line while he would see if Oltiyev was available to talk. A few minutes later the officer said, "We do not have anyone named Oltiyev working for us." When asked who Forum 18 could then talk to, he said "it is a wrong number."

Ilhom Merajov, Ikrom Merajov's brother, was surprised to hear Judge Tangriyev's denial that the Regional Court started the hearings on the case. "My brother and nine others are being tried together under Uzbekistan's Criminal Code Article 244-1 Part 3 Point A and Article 244-2 Part 1, and the trial already began on 22 April," he insisted to Forum 18 from Russia on 23 April. "My mother and father participated in the hearing, and were told it would continue on Friday [24 April]."

Ilhom Merajov was equally surprised to hear the claim to Forum 18 from Jamshid Yusupov of the Uzbek Parliament's Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office that no complaint had reached it regarding his brother. "It was from the official letter addressed to my father by Sayora Rashidova, Uzbekistan's Ombudsperson, that we found out the exact charges against my brother."

Ilhom Merajov said his brother was "never" involved in an extremist organisation. "Ikrom only read Said Nursi's books, which were published and sold openly in Uzbekistan," he told Forum 18. Ilhom Merajov said the Uzbek authorities are "confusing" extremism and terrorism with peaceful practice of Islam. "We have never even heard it announced

officially that some court somewhere in Uzbekistan made a decision to ban Nursi's books."

Called back at the Regional Court, Judge Tangriyev was not available to talk. His secretary told Forum 18 that she was "not sure when but perhaps" started on 22 April, and also she was "not sure" if it would continue on 24 April. She refused to answer further questions saying Forum 18 would need to "come to the court to find answers."

Neither was Bukhara Regional Prosecutor Ibadullo Nurov available to comment on the case. The Assistant Prosecutor (who did not give his name) told Forum 18 on 23 April that Nurov was on a business trip. Asked if Nursi's books were banned by a court decision in Uzbekistan, he said, "I cannot answer such questions over the phone." He refused to talk further, saying that he was "not allowed to talk over the phone."

Jamshid (who would not give his last name), an official of the Supreme Court, said he could not say whether or not Nursi's books were banned in Uzbekistan by a court decision. "Please, write a letter to the Foreign Ministry, and then they would send the letter to us," he told Forum 18.

Sentences on Yeti Iqlim (Seven Climates) contributors

On 6 April, Tashkent City Criminal Court led by Judge Mirzajanov (first name unknown) handed down eight-year prison sentences to Davron Tajiev, a correspondent of the newspaper "Yeti Iqlim" (Seven Climates), and Shavkat Ismoilov, an employee responsible for the paper's distribution. Sentenced to twelve years in prison in the same court hearing was Mammadali Shahobiddinov, a Muslim preacher from Namangan in the Fergana Valley in eastern Uzbekistan. All three were arrested on "suspicion of being sponsored by a Turkish radical religious movement Nursi," the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights society in Tashkent told Forum 18 on 17 April.

Tajiev, Ismoilov and Shahobiddinov were found guilty under Criminal Code's Article 244 Part 2, which punishes creating, leading or participating in a religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist and other prohibited organisation. In addition, Shahobiddinov was also found guilty under Article 233, which punishes illegal exit from and entry into the country.

Another Tashkent trial, controversy over rejected appeal

Tashkent City Court also began the trial of four more Muslims – Ibrohim Khudoybergenov, Talat Pulatov, Jahongir Kurbonov and another unknown man – all of whom are suspected of having ties with the Nursi movement, Ezgulik told Forum 18. "Based on the unconfirmed information the four are also journalists, and are related to the convicted Irmoq and Yeti Iqlim journalists."

The four men were witnesses in the court cases against the convicted Irmoq and Yeti Iqlim journalists. Khamza Jumayev, the main witness in those court cases, is in the "worst" situation – possibly another court case is awaiting him, Ezgulik told Forum 18.

Meanwhile, human rights defenders told Forum 18 that among the panel of judges at Tashkent City Court who on 31 March rejected the appeal against their long prison sentences lodged by five Muslim prisoners of conscience who had contributed to the Irmoq (Spring) Islamic-inspired journal was Judge Farhod Yigitaliev, who had handed down the original sentences in February.

Of the five Irmoq contributors, Bakhrom Ibrahimov and Davron Kabilov received 12 year sentences in general regime labour camps; Rovshanbek Vafoyev received a ten year

general regime labour camp sentence; and Abdulaziz Dadahonov and Botyrbek Eshkuziyev each received eight year general regime labour camp sentences.

Officials avoid comment on increased pressure

As is its usual practice, the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent was unwilling to talk to Forum 18 on 23 April. Asked why there have been so many cases in Uzbekistan with heavy prison sentences and enormous fines on religious believers, the official who answered the phone (who did not give his name) said, "If you want to talk to us, come to our office," and hung up the phone.

Jamshid Yusupov of Uzbekistan's Ombudsperson Office said none of the Muslims or Protestants in these recent cases has so far complained to them. Asked how he could explain the increase of the pressure by the Uzbek authorities on religious believers in recent months, Yusupov told Forum 18 on 23 April, "People can complain to us, and we talk to the authorities on concrete cases." Asked specifically what measures his office took in regards to Merajov's case Yusupov claimed that they had not received any compliant about his case. When asked who they concretely helped recently, Yusupov said, "Soon, in the beginning of May, we will publish on our new website the human rights situation report for 2008."

The City Court Chancellery refused to allow Forum 18 on 17 April to speak to Judges Yigitaliev and Mirzajanov. An official from the Court Chancellery, who did not give his name, said that the court has "forbidden" judges to speak to the public about the Irmoq and Yetti Iqlim cases. The official would not confirm or deny whether the court sentenced Tajiev, Ismoilov and Shahobiddinov on 6 April. "If you want to know you should come and participate in the trials," he told Forum 18 on 17 April. He then hung up the phone.

While the City Court does not share any information on the trials, it is believed that relatives of the defendants also have been "pressured" by the court not to share information with outsiders, the Central Asian news agency Voice of Freedom reported on 11 April.

Enormous fines given to Protestants

On 13 April a criminal court in Tashkent's Mirza-Ulugbek District, in a case led by Judge Sagdulla Ashirmatov, found three Protestant Christians guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 201 Part 2, which punishes violation of the procedure of arranging, holding of meetings, gatherings, street marches or demonstrations, and Article 240, which punishes violation of the Religion Law. The verdicts, a copy of one of which Forum 18 has seen, record that the three Protestants – Nargiza Abdurakhmonova, Kibriyo Kamilova, Oksana Bugayeva – were each fined 100 times the minimum monthly salary or 2,804,000 Soms (12,618 Norwegian Kroner, 1,452 Euros or 1,923 US Dollars).

Protestants complained to Forum 18 that the court did not "even" ask for an expert opinion of the confiscated materials in the pre-trial stage, nor did the judge indicate on which of the two parts of Article 240 he based his decision.

Judge Ashirmatov's assistant told Forum 18 on 16 April from Tashkent that the Protestants were fined for holding an "illegal" religious meeting in a private flat. Asked how the court came to that conclusion, he responded: "They [the three Protestants] told the court that they are Christians." When Forum 18 insisted on talking to the judge he said, "We already fined them, and there will be no more discussions," and hung up the phone.

The court case followed the raid on Abdurakhmanova's flat in Mirza-Ulugbek District on 10 April by nine officers of Tashkent City NSS secret police and regular police. NSS

officers, who presented themselves as Timur and Rustam (last names unknown), police officers Major Ergash Turgunov and Captain Elbek Khayrullaev and five other officers broke into Abdurakhmanova's flat at 3 pm when Abdurakhmanova, Kamilova, Bugayeva together with Vyacheslav Ten, Mamura Umarova and Rodion Sayfutdinov, were having lunch.

Christian literature confiscated and a Protestant deported

Protestants from Tashkent told Forum 18 that the officers who raided Abdurakhmanova's flat confiscated a Bible, Children's Bible, four CDs and two audio-tapes with Christian worship songs. "Then all who were present at the lunch were taken to the local Karasu-6 mahalla committee [local administration] and kept there for three hours. Everyone except Sayfutdinov was released." Sayfutdinov, a Kazakh citizen who lived in Tashkent city with official registration, was detained, taken to the State border with Kazakhstan, and "dumped" in Kazakh territory with "no money".

Major Turgunov told Forum 18 on 16 April that he was not "personally" involved in the deportation of Sayfutdinov. When asked why the Police raided Abdurakhmanova's flat he hung up the phone.

Several foreign Protestants legally resident in Uzbekistan who were active in religious communities have been summarily expelled in recent years, often with no explanation. Also forced out in 2008 were Uzbekistan's Chief Rabbi, Abe David Gurevich, and his wife Malka Gurevich.

15-day jail term for teaching Baptist beliefs

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (16.04.2009) / HRWF (24.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A court in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent on 8 April has given a 15-day prison term to Pavel Nenno, a deacon of an officially registered Baptist Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The main reason for Nenno's sentence was that he taught Baptists beliefs to children. Condemning Nenno's jailing and other recent raids and arrests of believers peacefully practising their faith, Pavel Peichev, General Secretary of the Uzbek Baptist Union, complains in an open letter of "increased persecution of believers in all regions" and "a wave of arrests and searches". He also states that the Uzbek government wants most Christian churches "to cease to exist". In a separate case, 17 people associated with a Bukhara [Bukhoro] Full Gospel church have each been fined 100 times the minimum monthly salary, for meeting together at a birthday party for a church member.

In both Nenno's jailing and the Bukhara case, children's religious activity has been identified by the authorities as a factor in their harsh sentences.

Peichev of the Baptist Union writes that "the government and authorities are undertaking everything in their power that Christianity would only be represented in the territory of the republic by the Russian Orthodox Church, and that the other Christian denominations would cease to exist. In this connection persecution of believers has intensified, and a wave of searches and arrests has overwhelmed all the regions." His open letter was published on 13 April on the website of the Russian Baptist Union.

As well as Protestant Christians, Muslim followers of the theologian Said Nursi, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees are also being persecuted.

15-day jail sentence

Baptist deacon Nenno was charged with teaching children religion. The authorities raided his house in Tashkent's Sergeli District on 27 March while he was "feeding neglected children from poor families" there, Protestants told Forum 18 from Tashkent. Eight National Security Service (NSS) secret police officers took part in the raid, along with other Sergeli District officials, the Protestants told Forum 18. After a first short detention on 27 March Nenno was released.

On 8 April, Nenno was summoned for additional questioning, taken to Sergeli District Criminal Court and sentenced under the Code of Administrative Offences to 15 days in jail. The Court also ordered materials seized from Nenno - which included 77 Christian books and magazines, 33 CDs and DVD discs, 28 video-tapes of Christian films, 40 children's posters on Christian themes, a laptop computer and other computer equipment - to be destroyed, Protestants complained to Forum 18 from Tashkent. Nenno is due to be freed on 23 April.

Sergeli District Criminal Court's phones went unanswered on 14 and 15 April.

A deacon under "special control"

"No one is being admitted to the building where Nenno is held, to give him food or warm clothes," Protestants complained to Forum 18. "He sleeps on the wooden floor in the clothes he was arrested in." A guard at the detention centre told those who wanted to give Nenno food and clothes that his file records him as being under "special control", and that he is banned from receiving anything. He is fed just one meal a day.

Deputy Hokim Shayislamov said he "would see" that Nenno would receive clothes and food but did not want to discuss the court decision. "I don't have time, I am in an important meeting," he told Forum 18 on 14 April when asked if the court's decision was justified.

17 people fined 100 times minimum monthly wage

In the central city of Bukhara, Judge Mahtob Khaitova of the Regional Criminal Court on 24 March upheld a 3 February court decision to fine 17 persons - 13 members of the registered Sun Bokym Full Gospel Church of Bukhara and four other "non-members" - 100 times the minimum monthly salary. The minimum monthly salary is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (128 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). The majority of Uzbekistan's population exist on very low incomes.

Judge Shukhrat Yadgarov, of the Bukhara City Criminal Court, on 3 February fined the following members of the Sun Bokym Church: Eduard and Alla Kim (the pastor of the church and his wife); Gulbahor, Parviza and Feruza Barakayeva; Firaya Abrosimova; Zilola Kalandarova; Muboshira Avezova; Nigora Nafasova; Natalya Orlova; Malika Kobylova; Alisher and Khurshida Mamedov.

Four other "non-members" were also fined: Lola Kodyrova; Fotima Pshikhacheva; Elmira Khasanova; and Olga Yegorova. Protestants have insisted to Forum 18 that these four are "just friends and acquaintances" of church members. All four stated in both court hearings that they came to a birthday party, and that they were not members of the church. However both courts alleged that they are church members.

Significant numbers of the 17 sentenced people are on very low incomes, have other family members dependent on their low incomes, or suffer from serious illnesses.

The court verdict, seen by Forum 18, declares that the 17 were convicted under Administrative Code Article 240 Part 2, which punishes "proselytism", and Article 241, which punishes violating the procedure for teaching religion.

Judge Yadgarov claimed in his decision that on 8 January in Barakaeva's home Eduard Kim was engaged in privately teaching religious doctrines, violating the procedure for teaching religious doctrines, and in missionary activity, converting people of one faith to another. Police Inspector Anvar Fazilov and policeman Alisher Ondayev of Bukhara Police Officer both admit in the court decision that they raided Barakaeva's home on 8 January. "I saw a table laid for a celebration. We found religious materials and literature, which we confiscated," reports Inspector Fazilov.

The Protestants explained to Forum 18 that they had gathered in Barakaeva's home to celebrate Natalya Orlova's birthday. "We had a birthday party in Gulbahor's home. She offered her home since Natalya's daughter had a baby recently, and needed rest," they told Forum 18.

The court decision claims that, even though the people gathered in Barakaev's home told the court that they were celebrating a birthday, the court had reasons to conclude that it was a religious meeting. The reasons the court claims are the presence of religious literature, and Orlova's birthday party being held on 8 January, instead of her 7 January birthday.

Children's religious activity attacked

The court decision states that on 17 September 2008 Bukhara Regional Justice Department had, after a raid, warned the church for holding religious activity outside its legal address. It also claims that, on 3 January 2009, Shahodat Babaeva and Shahnoza Rakhmatova, the headteachers of Schools number 30 and 37 of Bukhara City had complained to the Regional Justice Department, about children attending the church inviting other children from their schools to church activities.

Pressure on school children who attend places of worship in other parts of Uzbekistan - including mosques and Christian churches - as well as on their parents has been increased.

Headteacher Rakhmatova of School 37 said she had "no desire whatsoever" to talk about this to "anyone." "Please, understand, I cannot say anything about it," she insisted to Forum 18 on 15 April, when asked why she complained to the Justice Department. She gave the same answer when asked whether she had complained to the Justice Department.

Headteacher Babaeva of School 30 said she did not complain to the Regional Justice Department but "tried to convince" some parents not to take their children to church services in their free time. She suggested instead that the children be brought to sports activities arranged by her school. Told that the court decision specifies that she did complain to the Justice Department, Babaeva said, "It is not true. I never complained." Asked why she was against children attending a church, she responded: "I want our children to develop."

Officials defend harsh sentences

Judge Khaitova of the Regional Court defended her decision. "I see no violation by the City Court," she insisted to Forum 18 on 14 April from Bukhara. She did not want to talk about the case and said, "Read the decision, I have said everything there."

Judge Yadgarov of the City Court told Forum 18 that if the church is "unhappy" with the decision they may challenge it in the higher courts. "It was my personal judgement," he told Forum 18 when asked why he gave the defendants the maximum possible fine. Asked whether church members may meet to celebrate anything, or for any reasons other than religion, Yadgarov said he could not "answer that question on the phone."

Bukhara Regional Justice Department referred Forum 18 to Kodyr Yuliev, the "Head of Unit" (the name of the Unit was not given) to talk about Sun Bokym Church. Yuliev claimed his Department had not raided Sun Bokym Church, despite the City Court stating that this had happened. Yuliev then referred Forum 18 to Shahzod Hikmatov to comment on whether the Justice Department would remove the church's state registration. "Shahzod is waiting for your call in his office now," he said. Called back and told Hikmatov's number did not respond, Yuliev this time said he is "probably in the region somewhere."

'Religious movements are trying to destabilise Uzbekistan'

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (09.04.2009) / HRWF (09.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Uzbekistan continues to harass and fine people who exercise their freedom of thought, conscience or belief, Forum 18 News Service has found. In some of the most recent known incidents, 13 Baptists have been fined 50 times the minimum monthly salary and had literature confiscated; an official has attacked sharing beliefs, claiming that "missionary work should be done with uncivilised aborigines" and stating that Uzbeks "morally have no rights to change their religion"; and a church has lost its place of worship and ability to meet for worship services.

In the town of Almalyk [Olmalik], in the region around the capital Tashkent, thirteen members of an unregistered Baptist church were found guilty on 3 April of violating Article 240 Part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "attracting believers of one confession to another." The thirteen were: Tatyana Shopova, Ivan Danilevsky, Ruslana Karimova, Gulnara Khusnudinova, Yuri Zakharchenko, Vladimir Shirayev, Lyubov Abdalova, Yelena Guseva, Botyr Akhmedov, Sergei, Olga and Yekaterina Brislavsky and Rita Struchayeva.

The guilty verdict followed a Police Anti-Terrorism Department raid on a Sunday 15 March morning worship service in a private home. In a disturbing development, Russian Orthodox priest Father Igor Skorik took part in the raid, pressuring Baptists not to attend unregistered worship and to come to his church instead. Local Baptists point out that the raid and Fr Skorik's participation violates both Uzbek law and international human rights law. Church members were arrested, and police claimed the Baptists were "at risk of danger in the case of a terrorist act which could be carried out by people in their home".

Judge Islom Noyobov of Almalyk Criminal Court - in a verdict seen by Forum 18 - fined each of the thirteen fifty times the minimum monthly wage or, 1,402,000 Soms (6,600 Norwegian Kroner, 745 Euros or 990 US Dollars) each. The minimum monthly salary in Uzbekistan is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (128 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). The majority of Uzbekistan's population is poor, and has to exist on incomes that are very low, so the fine is an enormous amount.

A Protestant, who wanted to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 that only two of the Baptists, Shirayev and Akhmedov (who cannot hear or speak), were present at the

hearing. During the hearing, which lasted "only fifteen minutes," Judge Noyobov stated that "the Bible can only be read in places established by the law." Forum 18 was also told that the court did not offer sign language interpreters during the hearing.

The verdict claims that "anti-terror" operations had found church members offering religious literature on the streets "without special permission from the central organ of administration of a religious organisation" on 7 March and church members gathering for an "illegal religious teaching meeting" [a worship service] in a private house on 15 March.

The court ruled that 189 items of religious literature in Russian and Uzbek seized during the operations should be handed to the government's Religious Affairs Committee for it to decide what should happen to it.

Judge Noyobov refused to talk about the case. "I will not disclose to you any information on this case by telephone," he told Forum 18 from Almalyk on 7 April. He then hung up the phone.

The state Religious Affairs Committee also, as usual, refused to talk about this and other cases to Forum 18 on 7 April.

Hostility to people with religious literature continues

As was seen in the Almalyk case verdict, Uzbek authorities seem to be particularly hostile at present to people possessing religious literature. In Tashkent, Hamza District Police detained Ilgiz Bikkinin, a 66 year-old man and Vera Prokhorova, 54 year-old woman, members of an unregistered Baptist Church, on 5 April in a Metro station. A Bible, a New Testament in Uzbek, a Bible in Kazakh, six other Christian books, and thirty leaflets were confiscated from the two Baptists. They were then taken to Shaykhantakhur District Police's Unit for Guarding the Metro, where they were questioned by Police Major Vakhob Akhmonov. He is the senior police officer responsible for guarding Tashkent's Metro, a source wishing to remain unnamed told Forum 18.

A case under Articles 184-2 and 240 of the Code of Administrative Offences is being prepared, for action by Hamza District Police, Protestants told Forum 18. Article 184-2 punishes "illegal production, import, storage or distribution of religious literature" and Article 240 punishes "violation of the Religion Law". This is the latest in a series of nationwide actions against people with religious literature. Religious literature of all faiths remains under tight state control, even for texts such as the Koran and the Bible.

Police Major Akhmonov would not say whether any charges were being prepared against the Baptists. "We are still investigating the case," he told Forum 18 on 7 April. Asked whether people can carry religious books authorised by the authorities Akhmonov said, "They can carry only personal books. The Baptists had too many with them." He said the books were sent to the state Religious Affairs Committee for an expert opinion.

"Of course" people can carry their personal books, Alisher (he did not give his last name) from Hamza District Hokimat (Administration) told Forum 18 on 7 April. "However, as you may know, it is prohibited in Uzbekistan to distribute religious literature."

Attempting to justify the police action, Alisher stated: "Please understand that religious movements are trying to destabilise Uzbekistan." He did not explain how violating fundamental human rights stabilises Uzbekistan.

State media promotion of intolerance continues

The state-controlled media continues to be used to promote intolerance of religious minorities. Dilorom Kasymova, of the Chirchik [Chirchiq] Hokimat (Executive authority), has attacked the town's registered Jehovah's Witnesses, the 12.uz Uzbek news service reported on 1 April. Attacking "street preachers," Kasymova told the local press that Jehovah's Witnesses talk to people on the streets on religious topics, by which they "violate their own Charter and several articles of Uzbekistan's law." According to Kasymova "religious rites, spiritual talks, preaching and holding religious services must be done in the place of legal address of a religious organisation." She was also reported as saying that "missionary work should be done with uncivilised aborigines not with those who have firm convictions. Uzbeks are born Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses are trying to convert them to their faith."

Chirchik, which is close to Tashkent, is the only place in Uzbekistan where the Jehovah's Witnesses have a legally registered community and place of worship. If they lose registration, Jehovah's Witnesses have feared that all their religious activities in Uzbekistan will be banned. The state-controlled mass media is used to encourage intolerance of religious groups the government dislikes, and opposition to freedom of religion or belief in the country.

Kasymova told the press that all the religious organisations functioning in Chirchik have been officially registered. "This means there are no conflicting points in charters of those organisations with the law. We also monitor, arbitrate and keep contacts with them so there are no frictions between confessions."

Kasymova told Forum 18 on 8 April that Jehovah's Witnesses are involved in proselytism, which is prohibited. She insisted that they are "imposing" their religious views on people. Asked whether ethnic Uzbeks had the right to obtain information on other faiths and freedom to choose one if they wanted to do so, she said: "Under the Constitution, Uzbeks have the right to do so but not morally, since they are born as Muslims." When Forum 18 tried to ask Kasymova about her comments in the press she, excused herself saying that she could "not use the official telephone line for an interview," and hung up.

Wearing of prayer caps attacked, internet room prayers banned

The eastern Andijan [Andijon] Region's security agencies are making efforts to "eradicate" white prayer caps, Uznews reported in early April. From the middle of March, sellers of white caps in front of mosques and in bazaars were banned from selling them. "We were approached by Police, and officially declared to that we must not sell white caps," one man selling various religious accessories was reported as saying. An official from the local Muftiate (State-controlled Muslim leadership) was also reported as confirming the ban, saying that "white caps are worn by Arabs. Why should Uzbeks come under Arab influence?"

Such prayer caps are common in Central Asia, and this is not the first time the authorities in the Fergana [Farghona] Valley - many of whose residents are devout Muslims - have tried to stop the caps being worn.

Prayer in internet cafés has also been banned by the Andijan authorities. Some internet-café have been allowing young Muslims to pray in a special room, if they happened to be in the café at the times of namaz (prayers). Authorities in the Fergana Valley have in the past attempted to severely restrict Islamic practices and the involvement of young people in the region. More recently, officials in other parts of the country have stepped up pressure on school children who attend places of worship - including mosques and Christian churches - as well as on their parents.

Mahmud (he did not give his last name) from Andijan city Hokimat's Religious Affairs Department told Forum 18 on 8 April that Shaket Gulomov, the Head of Department was

not available to talk. When asked about the ban on white caps and prayer in internet-café's, he kept saying that he could not hear Forum 18. However, his voice was heard with clarity by Forum 18.

Further raids on Protestant churches

On 1 April, police and the National Security Service (NSS) secret police raided Greater Grace Protestant Church in the central city of Samarkand [Samarqand]. "As a result, the church lost its place for Sunday services and Bible classes," Protestants told Forum 18 from Samarkand on 5 April. Nobody is under arrest, but "today [5 April] the church could not hold its Sunday worship service at all. The Church is looking for a new place but it is not sure when it will be able to hold services." Greater Grace Church had prepared to celebrate Easter but "now they are afraid that they will not be able to celebrate."

Forum 18 has also learnt that Pastor Andrei Kosulitsky, who leads the registered Baptist Church in the city of Samarkand, was in late February given an official warning. In early March a registered Pentecostal Church in Fergana was raided and searched. And 10 members of the Korean-led Syn-Bogym Church, in the central city of Bukhara [Bukhoro], were fined under Articles 240 and 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences.

"We just need to make sure what they teach in their homes"

By Mushfig Bayram,

Forum 18 (02.04.2009) / HRWF (03.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Uzbekistan continues to penalise people who distribute religious literature, Forum 18 News Service has found. In two separate cases, Baptists from registered and unregistered churches are facing prosecution, fines and literature confiscations for distributing and possessing religious literature. In the case involving members of a registered church, a local official told Forum 18 that "we just need to make sure what they teach in their homes, and they need to get special permission to have religious activity in a private home." In another case in the north-west of the country, Kurbangul Aveniyazova has been tried in her absence for the "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials" and fined 20 times the minimum monthly salary. An Uzbek-language Bible and other material was also ordered to be destroyed. Asked why she ordered the Bible to be destroyed, the Judge told Forum 18 that she had received religious expert opinion that it was not authorised. The Chair of the regional state Religious Affairs Committee abruptly terminated the phone call before Forum 18 could ask why they had given an expert opinion that the Bible in Uzbek was unauthorised.

Uzbekistan continues to penalise people who distribute religious literature, Forum 18 News Service has found. Baptists Artur Alpaev and Aleksandr Avdeev face a criminal investigation, in the eastern city of Fergana [Farghona], for distributing Christian literature on the street. Two other Baptists from the capital Tashkent, Pavel Nenno and Olga Smirnova, who unlike the Fergana Baptists are from a state-registered church, face administrative penalties for teaching children and holding unauthorised religious literature in a private home. And in north-western Uzbekistan, a criminal court on 24 February fined a Protestant, Kurbangul Aveniyazova, for the "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials."

The state Religious Affairs Committee refused to talk to Forum 18 about these and other cases on 31 March.

Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna devotees are also among those who face punishment for holding or sharing their literature amid the government's harsh censorship. The import, production and distribution of all religious literature remains under tight state control, even for texts such as the Koran and the Bible.

Baptists in Fergana have urged an end to the ban on people sharing their beliefs with others. "It is very difficult to bring Christian literature into the country, and so for us each book is precious," they told Forum 18 from Fergana on 20 March. "From our experience we know that literature confiscated for an expert analysis is usually destroyed after a court hearing. The fact that New Testaments, Gospels and individual books of the Bible are subject to destruction testifies to the serious violations of human rights."

A criminal case has been started by the Fergana city Prosecutor's Office against Alpaev and Avdeev, as they run a street library, Protestants who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18. They are being investigated under Article 216-2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "violation of the laws on religious organisations". The case has been sent to the Investigation Department of the Fergana City Police, where it is being led by Chief of Department Alisher Irisov.

Alpaev and Avdeev were among four members of the local Council of Churches Baptist congregation - who refuse to register with the state - detained by the police and National Security (NSS) secret police on 27 December 2008, for offering literature to passers-by on the street. The two other church members, Vladimir Andoniu and Vladimir Potekhin, were given heavy fines under the Administrative Code in February.

Baptists told Forum 18 from Fergana that police again prevented church members from offering their literature on the street on 14 March. Two police officers approached Alpaev and two other church members, Vera Beryaleva and Elena Kim, and confiscated all the literature they had with them. They said it would be sent for an "expert analysis". They did not give the church members any record of the confiscation.

The Baptists point out that Alpaev has already been punished under the Administrative Code and that this would count as a second "offence". "A third would be considered a criminal matter and would face a harsher punishment than a fine."

Zohid Madaminov, the Deputy Chief of Investigation Department of Fergana City Police insisted to Forum 18 on 2 April that the Baptists were not supposed to distribute books on the street. "Books must be sold or distributed in bookshops or libraries."

Deputy Chief Madaminov played down the Baptists' concerns over possible criminal charges. "There is nothing to worry about," he insisted, "The Chief [Irisov] talked to them this morning [2 April], and it will soon be over." Madaminov said "only" administrative charges could be brought in this case.

Avdeev has already been punished under the Administrative Code for his religious activity. In September 2008, Fergana City Criminal Court found him guilty of violating Article 184-2, which punishes "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials". He was fined and the literature confiscated from him - including Bibles - was ordered destroyed. Avdeev's appeals were rejected in October and December 2008. Alpaev similarly has faced fines and imprisonment under the Administrative Code for his religious activity.

In a separate case in Sergeli District of Tashkent, eight secret police officers, together with other local officials, raided the private home of Pavel Nenno at lunchtime on 27 March, Protestants told Forum 18. Nenno is a deacon at a registered Baptist congregation. Present were a number of children from poor local families he regularly feeds. During the raid, officers seized 77 Christian books and magazines, as well as 33

discs and 28 videotapes with Christian films as well as children's posters and his computer.

The operation was led by Captain Rustam Ergashev of the NSS secret police, who was also accompanied by the District Hokim (administration chief) and officials of the Fire Safety Department, the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service and the mahalla committee (local self-government). Protestants complain that the Fire Safety Department and the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service had no right to intervene as this is a private home, not a firm or organisation.

Although Nenno and Smirnova belong to a registered church, Batyr Shayislamov, Sergeli District's Deputy Hokim insisted to Forum 18 on 2 April that Nenno needs to register the religious activity in his home with the Ministry of Justice, and also inform the local mahalla committee (self-government) and the executive authorities about "all their activity." Mahalla committees are a key part of Uzbekistan's structures of control and oppression.

Deputy Hokim Shayislamov admitted that, alongside law-enforcement agencies, he also participated in the raid. "We needed to know why people gathered in his [Nenno's] home," he told Forum 18 on 2 April from Tashkent. "They gathered 30-35 children in Nenno's home, and taught religion, which, according to our laws, is forbidden." He said by doing so, the Baptists instilled in them religious views. Asked whether Baptist teachings were banned in Uzbekistan, he said, "We just need to make sure what they teach in their homes, and they need to get special permission to have religious activity in their private home."

Following the raid on 27 March, Nenno and Olga Smirnova, who was cooking at the time, were taken to the Sergeli District police station for questioning. Later Smirnova was released. However, Nenno was locked in a cell that evening at the police station, "where he was illegally held for the next 18 and a half hours even though they had already established his identity," local Protestants complained to Forum 18. He was freed at lunchtime on 28 March.

The books and recordings seized from Nenno have been sent for an "expert analysis" to the government's Religious Affairs Committee. Local Protestants fear both Nenno and Smirnova will face charges under four Articles of the Administrative Code: Article 53, which punishes "violation of sanitary laws"; Article 211, which punishes "violation of fire safety procedures"; Article 240, which punishes "violation of the laws on religious organisations; and Article 241, which punishes "violation of the procedure for teaching religion".

Deputy Hokim Shayislamov said it is "up to the law-enforcement agencies now" how to punish the Baptists.

In the north-western region of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston], Nukus district Criminal Court, under Judge Bardagul Bekzhanova, has tried an administrative case against Kurbanqul Aveniyazova. She is a 56 year old resident of Khazhan village, and was tried in her absence under article 184 part 2 of the Administrative Code for "illegal production, storage, import or distribution of religious materials." Aveniyazova was fined 560,800 Soms (2,550 Norwegian Kroner, 290 Euros, or 390 US Dollars). The minimum monthly salary in Uzbekistan is, from 16 November 2008, 28,040 Soms (128 Norwegian Kroner, 15 Euros or 20 US Dollars). The majority of the population is poor, and has to exist on incomes that are very low.

A Bible in the Uzbek language, nine DVD disks of Christian films confiscated from her were ordered to be destroyed by the same court decision, a copy of which Forum 18 has seen. The court decision was delivered to Aveniyazova by post on 31 March.

Judge Bekzhanova defended her decision, saying that Aveniyazova was not allowed to teach religion privately and distribute unauthorised religious literature. "I gave her the mildest possible punishment for the kind of violation," she told Forum 18 from Nukus on 2 April. Asked why she ordered the Bible to be destroyed, she said she had received religious expert opinion that the confiscated materials were not authorised. "Aveniyazova can still make an appeal," she reported, "Maybe she will get her Bible back." Bekzhanova said that according to the law, material evidence must be destroyed after a case is completed. She did not state why the court decision was delivered to the defendant, who lives in the same district, 39 days after the verdict.

Forum 18 was unable to find out from Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Committee why they had given an expert opinion that the Bible in the Uzbek language was unauthorised. Nurulla Zhamolov, the Committee's Chair, did not want to talk to Forum 18 and abruptly terminated the phone call.

Forum 18 also knows of a case in Gulistan, in the south-western Syrdarya region, where on 29 March an unregistered Baptist church's Sunday morning worship meeting was raided. 15 law-enforcement officials with video-cameras broke into the Church service. Protestants from Syrdarya told Forum 18 that Gulistan city Police officers recorded every church member present at the service, and confiscated three boxes of children's Bibles.

Raids on other Protestant communities continue, in one case involving a Russian Orthodox priest taking part in a police, NSS secret police and local authority raid.

Muslims face particularly harsh punishments for religious activity, and the authorities are in the middle of a crackdown on followers of the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Five Nursi followers were given harsh prison sentences in Tashkent in February. At least nine others accused of following Said Nursi remain in prison in Bukhara awaiting trial.

Short-term imprisonments of Protestants, for unregistered religious activity, also happened in March.

Cleric takes part in police raid on religious community

By Felix Corley and Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (31.03.2009) / HRWF (01.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Police in Uzbekistan "decided to invite" a Russian Orthodox priest to take part in a raid on a group of Baptists, a police officer has told Forum 18 News Service. Father Igor Skorik of Almalyk's Assumption of the Mother of God Church pressured Baptists not to attend unregistered worship and to come to his church instead, church members told Forum 18. The use of a cleric of one religious community to pressure members of another in cooperation with the authorities is a disturbing new development. The raid on a private home was led by Major Urazali Kholbekov, from the Tashkent Regional Criminal Investigation and Counter-Terrorism Department, who apparently arranged for Fr Skorik to take part in the raid. Fr Igor claimed he did not violate the law by taking part. "I was not there to check up on the Baptists but to just advise them," he insisted. Local Baptists point out that the raid and Fr Skorik's participation violates both Uzbek law and international human rights law. Church members were arrested, and police claimed Baptists were "at risk of danger in the case of a terrorist act which could be carried out by people in their home".

An officer of the Police Anti-Terrorism Department in the industrial town of Almalyk [Olmaliq] in Tashkent Region has defended a raid on a Sunday morning Baptist worship

service in the town. Officer Shavkat – who would not give his last name - insisted to Forum 18 News Service on 31 March that the authorities did not violate the law by inviting the local Russian Orthodox priest to join the raid. "We have been allowed to do that," he claimed, though he did not explain what law allows this. Local Baptists have told Forum 18 they believe both the raid and the involvement of a cleric of a different religious organisation are illegal.

Officer Shavkat said they "decided to invite" the Orthodox priest too during the raid, because the Baptists did not heed the authorities' earlier warnings to stop meeting in private homes. "They may go to an official church building but the law prohibits meeting in private homes for religious purposes," he said.

During the 15 March raid on the service, Father Igor Skorik of the town's Assumption of the Mother of God Church pressured the Council of Churches Baptists not to attend unregistered worship and to come to his church instead, church members told Forum 18 from Almalyk on 25 March. The use of a cleric of one religious community to pressure members of another in cooperation with the authorities is a disturbing new development for Uzbekistan.

Congregations of the Council of Church refuse on principle to register with the authorities, insisting that Uzbekistan's Constitution and the country's international human rights commitments make no mention of any requirement that they should have state registration before they can function.

Protestants told Forum 18 that the service in a private home was raided by eight police officers – two in uniform and six in plain clothes. It was led by Major Urazali Kholbekov, who identified himself as being from the Tashkent Regional Criminal Investigation and Counter-Terrorism Department. It was he who, they say, arranged for Fr Igor to be brought along. They say this is a violation of Article 5 Part 1 of the Religion Law, which declares that religion and the state are separate and does not allow any privileges for any one faith over any other, and Article 5 Part 4, which bans state officials from giving any state functions to religious organisations.

Fr Igor's account of his participation

Fr Igor confirmed that he visited the Baptist meeting on 15 March together with Almalyk Police. He said he did not remember who exactly it was but "the gentlemen who asked" him to go with them "were in police uniform." "I went there to warn the people that they would get into trouble for attending unregistered meetings," he insisted to Forum 18 on 30 March. "I suggested to them instead that they come to our church services since we are an officially registered church." Fr Igor said it was the first time he was involved in a raid on an unregistered church.

Protestants complain that Fr Igor accused those present of having done "a deal with the West," that they were meeting "illegally" and acting "against the state". He called on them to come to him at the Russian Orthodox Church. The Protestants noted ironically that Fr Igor was himself violating Article 240 Part 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "proselytism".

Fr Igor said he is "disturbed" by the Baptists who teach ethnic Russians contrary to Russian Orthodox doctrines. "They are leading [ethnic] Russians astray," he complained. Fr Igor also told Forum 18 that the Baptists proselytise ethnic Uzbeks which is against the law. "We do not go out on the streets specifically inviting Uzbeks to our church." Asked whether he would turn away Uzbeks who wanted to attend his church, he said they are welcome "if they come of their free will."

He denied having accused the Baptists of cooperating with the West. "Personally I said nothing of the sort to the Baptists," Fr Igor commented, although he would not clarify if he has said anything on those lines to anyone.

Fr Igor also said he does not think he violated the law by participating in the raid. "I was not there to check up on the Baptists but to just advise them," he insisted. "I am not against their praying or reading their Bibles in twos or threes in their homes but I am against imposing their religious views on people on the street."

Officials' accounts of Fr Igor's participation

Anti-Terrorism Department officer Shavkat told Forum 18 that the law allows the authorities to quickly create a group of officials from Anti-Terrorist Police, National Security Service (NSS) secret police, religious affairs bodies and mahalla committees (residential self-governments), as in this case with the Baptists. "We went there to check up on their activity, which we knew was illegal," he told Forum 18.

Mahalla committees are a key part of Uzbekistan's structures of control and oppression. The NSS secret police very closely monitors all religious activity.

Tashkent Regional Police's Anti-Terrorism Department told Forum 18 on 31 March that Major Kholbekov works out of his office in Almalyk. However, Officer Shavkat told Forum 18 that Major Kholbekov works for Tashkent Regional Police Anti-Terrorism Department, and "oversees the whole region." "He comes here when he has a task to do," he said. Neither Tashkent Regional nor Almalyk City Police would give any contacts for Major Kholbekov.

Religious affairs officials at Tashkent Regional Hokimat (administration) were not available to comment on the case. Forum 18 was referred to Deputy Hokim Sodyg Abdullaev, who oversees religious organisations in the region. However his assistant, who did not give his name, said Abdullaev was unavailable to talk. Forum 18 was referred to Rakhmatullo Shiraliev, but none of the two numbers given to Forum 18 worked.

Similarly the government's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Tashkent did not want to discuss the issue. "If you want to hear us then come to our office in person," the official – who did not give his name – told Forum 18 on 31 March when asked why authorities would invite a representative of one religious community for a raid on another. He then hung up the phone.

Use of clerics in past raids

Although raids by police, NSS secret police and other state agencies on religious communities in Uzbekistan – both registered and unregistered – are common, it is very rare for state officials to use clerics of the state-backed Muslim Board or the Russian Orthodox Church to pressure victims of the raids to halt their activity and change their religious affiliation.

The state has frequently used such pressure from both Muslim and Russian Orthodox clerics in neighbouring Turkmenistan, and officials in Azerbaijan have occasionally used Muslim clerics to pressure non-Muslims to change their religious affiliation.

Forum 18 knows of one case in Uzbekistan several years ago when a number of Baptists – who cannot hear or speak – were summoned to a mosque in a bid to pressure them to renounce their faith and adopt a different faith. However, none of those summoned went.

The raid itself

The eight police officers who raided the Baptist congregation in Almalyk claimed to be conducting an identity check, church members told Forum 18. The church meets in a private home which belongs to Sergei and Olga Brislavsky. Police officer Ilyas Babahonov was among the officers who filmed the Baptists during the raid.

Local Protestants complain that Major Kholbekov warned that, because the congregation is not registered, the Brislavskys were putting themselves and those in their home "at risk of danger in the case of a terrorist act which could be carried out by people in their home". Protestants dismissed this claim.

Officers appeared angry that children were present, accusing the adults of "harming their future". Officials in other parts of the country have stepped up pressure since late 2008 on school children who attend places of worship - including mosques and Christian churches - as well as on their parents.

Protestants also complain that Major Kholbekov's questioning of those present about their faith violates Article 3 Part 1 of the 1998 Religion Law, which guarantees the right to practice any faith or none. They complain that his questions as to why they do not attend the town's Russian Orthodox church violate Article 3 Part 2 of the Religion Law, which bans any pressure on any individual in choosing or practicing any faith or none.

Baptists taken to police station

Police took twelve of the Baptists present to the town police station, including the Brislavskys, as well as Lyubov Abdalova and Rita Struchaeva, who were already facing administrative charges for running a street library in the town. The twelve were held and most were questioned for four and a half hours. Sergei Brislavsky was threatened with 15 days in prison. Three of the detained church members, who cannot hear or speak, were forced to remain in the police station corridor.

The twelve refused to sign any statements or documents. Police confiscated three Bibles and five hymn books from them before they were freed. Administrative cases under Article 240 are being considered against the twelve Baptists.

Abdalova and Struchaeva had been detained by two plain clothes police officers in Almalyk on the afternoon of 7 March as they were offering Christian books at a street library. Some 50 Christian books and magazines were confiscated, including five New Testaments in Uzbek and Russian and the Council of Churches' regular magazine "Herald of Truth". The officers took the two women to the town police station. One of the police officers turned out to be Timur Sabriev of the Criminal Investigation and Counter-Terrorism Department, Protestants told Forum 18.

Officers drew up the record of the confiscated literature in Uzbek and refused to provide a translation, as the Baptists do not speak it. Officers threatened to detain the women for up to 72 hours and demanded that they write a statement and sign documents in Uzbek. However, the two women refused to write or sign anything "as they didn't consider themselves guilty," as church members told Forum 18. Abdalova was photographed next to the confiscated literature.

The two women were freed at 9pm after being told that the literature was being sent to the government's Religious Affairs Committee to be checked. Officers said it would only be returned if the Committee declares that it is "permitted in Uzbekistan".

Cases were prepared against them under the Code of Administrative Offences; Article 240 and Article 241. On 20 March they were ordered to appear on 23 March at Almalyk Criminal Court, but the outcome remains unknown.

The wider context

Uzbekistan is in the middle of a crackdown on religious activity. A campaign has been launched in recent months against followers of the Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Five Nursi followers were given harsh prison sentences in Tashkent in February. At least nine others accused of following Said Nursi remain in prison in Bukhara [Bukhoro] awaiting trial.

Short-term imprisonments of Protestants for unregistered religious activity have also taken place in March.

Uzbekistan also continues to raid, prosecute and fine people, in different parts of the country, for possessing and distributing religious literature.

Four Protestants jailed, three more detained in homelessness centre

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (18.03.2009) / HRWF (20.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - As well as imposing long prison sentences on Muslims accused of following the theologian Said Nursi, Uzbekistan has since the beginning of March imposed short jail terms on four Protestants, as well as detaining three more in a centre for the homeless, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Three Protestants were each jailed for 15 days, after police raided a meal in a private home where the three were present, and three more were held in a homelessness centre for between four and eleven days. Asked why individuals must ask for permission to gather for a religious purpose, the judge told Forum 18 that "I am not a law-maker, and I don't want to discuss the law." In a separate case, a Baptist was jailed for 10 days after some 20 officials from various state agencies – including the Presidential Administration – raided a prayer meeting in a registered church. Officials told church members that they need special permission for any services apart from those on Sundays, though Forum 18 can find no requirement for this in published laws or regulations.

Three Protestant Christians have each been sentenced to 15 days in prison in Andijan [Andijon] Region of eastern Uzbekistan after police raided a meal in a private home where the three were present, Protestants who preferred not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 News Service. A further three Protestants present were held in a centre for the homeless for between four and eleven days, for not having identity documents with them. In a separate case, a Baptist in the capital Tashkent was given a ten-day term in prison after some 20 officials from various state agencies – including the Presidential Administration – raided a prayer meeting in a registered church. Officials told church members that they need special permission for any services apart from those on Sundays, though Forum 18 can find no requirement for this in published laws or regulations.

Attempts to discuss this upsurge in detentions of Protestants, and of Muslims, since the beginning of March with any official at the Uzbek Parliament's Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office were unsuccessful. On 18 March Forum 18 was told that Ombudsperson Sayora Rashidova was "unavailable" to talk about the detentions since she was "receiving citizens with complaints." Forum 18 was referred to Jamshid Yusupov, but he was also unavailable to talk. Forum 18 was asked to call back several times on 18 March and was finally told that Yusupov was "receiving complaints from citizens and was unavailable."

The religious freedom situation is worsening in Uzbekistan. A country-wide campaign against followers of the Muslim theologian Said Nursi is underway, with harsh sentences being handed down on some Nursi followers while others remain in prison awaiting trial. Members of other Protestant churches, as well as Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses are also being detained or harassed. In north-west Uzbekistan, officials attempt to obstruct the burials of Protestant Christians and those related to them.

Officials have also stepped up pressure since late 2008 on school children who attend places of worship – including mosques and Christian churches – as well as on their parents.

Following the raid on the meal in the town of Kurgantepe in Andijan Region, Judge Shavkat Shadmanov of Kurgantepe District Criminal Court on 3 March handed down 15-day jail terms to three members of an unregistered Protestant church – Mahmudjon Turdiev and Mahmudjon Boynazarov, both residents of Andijan Region, as well as Ravshanjon Bahramov, a resident of the adjoining Namangan Region. The three were found guilty of violating Article 241 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes violating the procedure for teaching religious doctrines.

Protestants from Andijan told Forum 18 that the arrested church members are being held together with criminal offenders at the Temporary Detention Centre of Kurgantepe Police Department. "They should instead have been sent to the Detention Centre for administrative violators at Andijan Regional Police Department," one Protestant complained to Forum 18.

Judge Shadmanov told Forum 18 that, because the defence did not appeal against the court decision within the allowed ten days, the three Protestants can now only complain to the Panel of Judges for any violation of court procedures. "My decision was based on the Law," he insisted from Kurgantepe on 17 March. Asked why individuals must ask for permission to gather for a religious purpose, he responded: "I am not a law-maker, and I don't want to discuss the law." Shadmanov said the three are due to be released on 18 March.

Shadmanov refused to say whether the detained Protestants would receive any compensation were the Panel of Judges to overrule his decision to imprison them. "I don't think 15-day administrative detention is a very strict punishment for such a violation," he insisted. He warned though that if caught a second time for another administrative violation, the three would then face criminal charges.

Problems for the three Protestants began in the evening of 1 March, when five police officers from Kurgantepe District Police – Shermetov, Halilov, Ergashev, Musaev and Mahammatov (first names unknown) - raided the home of a church member, claiming to be conducting a passport check-up. (Two of the officers were from the Anti-Terrorism Department.) At this time a group of Protestants and their families had gathered to have a meal together.

Six men out of those present – the three who were subsequently imprisoned, as well as Andijan resident Mahmudjon Dehkanbaev and Namangan residents Alisher Shorahmedov and Murod Rahimov - were detained and taken to the police station. Kurgantepe District Police and Prosecutor's Office "fabricated" administrative violations against the detained Protestants, Forum 18 was told.

The District Prosecutor sanctioned the one-month detention of Dehkanbaev, Shorahmedov and Rahimov at Kurgantepe Rehabilitation Centre for Homeless Persons as of 2 March, since they did not have any identification documents on them, Forum 18 was told. The three were taken to the Centre that same day. However, after intervention on

their behalf, Rahimov – whose health had deteriorated - was released on 6 March, and Dehkanbaev and Shorahmedov were released on 13 March.

Gulmira Turdieva – Mahmudjon Turdiev's wife – brought food every day to the Detention Centre for her husband and the other two detained men. However, she was not sure whether it was passed to them, Protestants complained to Forum 18. But on 14 March, Police Captain Abduvohid Ahmedov, the Chief of the Detention Centre, stopped her bringing any further food. "We are afraid that the prison officials may be keeping them hungry."

Captain Ahmedov "unlawfully" asked Turdieva that she pay 192,000 Soms (914 Norwegian Kroner, 104 Euros or 136 US Dollars) for "feeding and keeping" the three detained men in the Detention Centre, Protestants told Forum 18. "Otherwise he threatened not to release them until she paid the entire amount."

Captain Ahmedov denied that he was involved in any money extortion from Turdieva. "I will not tell you anything about this case," he told Forum 18 on 18 March.

In a similar case in Tashkent, Judge Jafar Kurbanov of Mirza-Ulugbek District Criminal Court on 11 March handed down a 10-day jail term to Roman Tsoi, a member of an ethnic Korean Baptist Church. He was found guilty under Uzbekistan Article 201 Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "violating the procedure for arranging and holding gatherings, meetings, street marches and demonstrations."

The court decision, seen by Forum 18, records that the charges brought against the Church were based on three separate complaints from the Mirza-Ulugbek District Hokimat (administration), Tashkent City Justice Department and the State Religious Affairs Committee. All three agencies complained to the court that the Baptist Church did not specifically ask for permission to hold a meeting on 6 March. The Baptist Church has had official registration with the Tashkent City Justice Department since 27 October 1998.

Tsoi is being held at Tashkent City Police Department's Detention Centre for administrative violators, Forum 18 was told.

Judge Kurbanov's assistant, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 that Tsoi is due to be freed on 21 March. He said Judge Kurbanov was unavailable to talk and he could not comment on the case either.

The Church was raided on 6 March at 10.45 pm, while around 60 congregation members were holding a prayer meeting, Forum 18 was told. Most of those present were ethnic Korean citizens of Uzbekistan. Around twenty officials from various state agencies – including the police and the National Security Service (NSS) secret police - broke into the church, some carrying video-cameras.

Five officials gave their names: Bahtiyor Kudratov from the Presidential Administration; Bekzod (last name unknown, but not Deputy Chair Begzot Kadyrov) from the state Religious Affairs Committee; Umid Rasulov of Tashkent City's Justice Department; and Police Inspectors Fayziev and Dustmuhamedov (last names unknown), Forum 18 was told. The officials told the congregation that they were looking for foreign missionaries. "They checked up and took video footage of everyone present."

Rasulov told church members that they may "only" come to services on Sundays, and that for other meetings they have to ask for specific permission from the Tashkent City Justice Department ten days in advance, the Baptists reported. Rasulov also "warned that it is prohibited at all to gather in the church building after 10 pm". Officials demanded that the pastor, Artur Kan, write a statement. When he refused to do so he

was "threatened" that the church's registration would be stripped from it. The officials pressured Pastor Kan, his wife Natalya Kan, Yupiter Kim, Yelizaveta Ten, Dmitry Kim, Tatyana Kim, Anastasia Yudina, Roman Tsoi and Natalya Grifanova to write statements, Baptists reported.

Tashkent City's Justice Department on 18 March referred Forum 18 to one of their officials, Umid Shadiev, but he refused to discuss the case.

'Your dead will not be buried'

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (16.03.2009) - The National Security Service (NSS) secret police and the head of the local mahalla (town district) have obstructed the burial of an elderly Muslim, Zhumabai Smetullaev, who had died in the town of Khodjeli, close to Nukus in the Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston] Autonomous Republic of north-western Uzbekistan. A source who preferred not to be identified for fear of reprisals from the authorities told Forum 18 News Service from the town that this was to punish the man's widow, Aksulu Smetullaeva, and their son Polat for their Protestant Christian affiliation. The two are the only Christians in their family. Mahalla officials admitted to Forum 18 that Smetullaev's burial had been obstructed, but denied that the initiative came from them. One official who asked not to be identified said the decision had come from the NSS secret police, but Forum 18 was unable to reach any official at the town NSS.

Sources told Forum 18 that pressure on the family and people in the mahalla from the Khodjeli authorities continues, even though Smetullaev has now been buried. "Today [16 March] Aksulu's neighbours were summoned to the NSS and warned that if anyone helps the family organise the traditional 40th and 100th day ceremonies after the burial will be liable under the Criminal Code," sources told Forum 18. Aksakals (respected community elders) who helped with the burial have also been summoned to the NSS. Officials go from home to home warning people that whoever accepts Christianity will be punished. They were reported as telling people: "Your dead will not be buried." The local residents are in shock, sources told Forum 18.

In Central Asian culture, participation by perhaps fifty or more local residents is an important element in burials and subsequent commemoration of the dead. Families who cannot attract such community participation are seen as social outcasts.

The source said that when 67 year-old Smetullaev died of a heart attack on 11 March, the family wished to bury him in the town cemetery. "The authorities tried to prevent the burial at first by not allowing any imam to conduct the funeral procession," complained the source.

When "finally" some aksakals from KS-5 district of the town where the family lives decided to go ahead with Smetullaev's burial, the authorities did not interfere. However, they only allowed his burial "just outside the cemetery" on 13 March. "The authorities treated the deceased Smetullaev not as human." The authorities "want to showcase" in Khodjeli that whoever accepts Christianity will be punished, the source complained.

In the wake of Smetullaev's death, four local officials came to the family home on 11 March. They identified themselves as the town's Head Imam, the Deputy Head Imam,

the Head of the Mahalla Committee and an NSS secret police officer. They told the family that it was "forbidden" for them to hold the traditional funeral ceremony, Forum 18 was told. The officials warned people in the area that if any imam conducts the funeral "then he will have to deal with the NSS," said the source. Also, the officials "forbade" allocating a plot in the town cemetery for the burial and "fixed surveillance" at the cemetery so no one could dig a grave.

Mahalla committees are a key part of Uzbekistan's structures of control and oppression. The NSS secret police very closely monitors all religious activity.

When Aksulu Smetullaeva went to Khodjeli's main mosque to sort out the problem, Khodjeli's Head Imam Urazymbet (last name unknown) "demanded" that she write a statement saying that she attends "the Isa Masih [Jesus Christ] sect", teaches people Christian doctrines and holds religious services. "She was also told to indicate their leaders and pastors," the source from Khodjeli told Forum 18.

The imam told Smetullaeva that it was "necessary" to send such a statement to the central authorities in Tashkent to get permission for the burial. "The authorities from Tashkent have warned us not to participate in the funeral and not to allow any imams to conduct a funeral either," Imam Urazymbet was reported as telling Smetullaeva. The imam also told her that she needed publicly to renounce her faith in Christ. "Only then would you be allowed to bury the deceased," he was reported as telling her. She did not agree to the conditions and went back to ask the local aksakals to help with the burial.

Aliko Sultanov, the Chair of the KS-5 Mahalla, told Forum 18 that they are not pressuring the Smetullaevs for their religious beliefs. "The order to prevent the burial did not come from us," he insisted to Forum 18 from Khodjeli on 16 March. He referred Forum 18 to Hodjabai, his deputy who oversees the apartment block where the Smetullaevs live – his last name was not given – who happened to be there in the office.

Hodjabai likewise denied the allegations that they put pressure on the family. "We are small people, we are not the ones who command here," he told Forum 18. "We had warned the family earlier too, but they did not heed our warnings." Hodjabai refused to explain what the warnings were about.

Another official from Khodjeli – who asked not to be identified - told Forum 18 on 16 March that Khodjeli Department of the NSS secret police was behind the pressure on the family. The phones at Khodjeli Department of the NSS went unanswered on 16 March.

The officer at Nukus Department of the NSS – he did not give his name – told Forum 18 they would call Khodjeli and find out what happened. The officer asked Forum 18 to call back later and talk to their Department Chief. However, the calls later went unanswered.

The man who answered the phone at Imam Urazymbet's office told Forum 18 that he was in a meeting with the Hokimat (Executive authority). He gave a different number for the imam, which went unanswered on 16 March.

Shavkat Shamratov, the Deputy Hokim of Khodjeli, said he would look into the matter and asked Forum 18 to call back later on 16 March. On calling back later, Forum 18

was referred to another official, Khudoyor Kurbaniyazov. Kurbaniyazov insisted that there should be "no problems" with burial in Khodjeli. "We have six cemeteries, and even one for Christians," he told Forum 18 on 16 March. He denied that Christians are persecuted in the town. He also denied that any instructions have been received from Tashkent to prevent Christian activity. "I hear about this problem from you for the first time," he insisted. He too promised to look into the issue.

Nurulla Zhamolov, Chairman of Karakalpakstan's Religious Affairs Committee, also downplayed the issue, insisting that it must have been some misunderstanding. "I will call Khodjeli and sort out the issue, please, call me back in hour." Zhamolov did not answer subsequent calls on 16 March.

The assistant of Muzaffar Akhmedjanov, advisor on Nationalities and Religions to Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov, told Forum 18 on 16 March to call back later when he is free to talk. Later, however, Forum 18 was referred to Uzbekistan's state Religious Affairs Committee.

As has been the custom of the Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent, the official who answered the phone told Forum 18 that they do not give interviews over the phone. Informed that Forum 18 was referred to them by the Presidential Advisor, he hung up.

The Smetullaev family has already faced pressure. In the middle of February, police and NSS secret police officers had raided their home without a search warrant. They found and seized a personal Bible that belonged to Polat Smetullaev, who is 39 years old and an invalid since early childhood. "The Bible was a source of hope in his life," the source told Forum 18. "The officers put moral and psychological pressure on the family."

Protestants from Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan, also told Forum on 16 March that they face similar problems burying their dead. "The authorities do not allow family members of deceased Christians to bury them according to local traditions," one Protestant said. "We will bury a Christian woman today [16 March] on our own. The community is forbidden to participate or render any material help." However, in this case the authorities are not preventing the Protestants to bury the dead in a cemetery, Forum 18 was told.

Officials in Karakalpakstan region are particularly harsh violators of Uzbekistan's international human rights commitments, as all religious activity that is not either state-controlled-Islamic or Russian Orthodox is banned and a criminal offence.

Repression against both minority religious communities and the majority Muslim community in Karakalpakstan continues. Mystery surrounds the fate of imams arrested in the second half of 2008. It remains unclear whether all the imams have been tried, and whether they are innocent or guilty of official allegations of embezzlement and drug possession.

On 21 January Karakalpakstan's Supreme Court upheld Tokhtakupir District Court decision from 24 November 2008 to fine local Protestants Vladimir Kim, Ulash Bazarbaeva and Darikhan Toremuratova.

The three had each been fined 25,040 Soms (120 Norwegian Kroner, 14 Euros or 18

US Dollars). In addition to the fines, the court had ordered the confiscation of a Bible, a New Testament in Kazakh and a Christian brochure. The Protestants were not given a copy of the court confiscation order.

In another case, Judge B. Bekzhanova of Nukus District Criminal Court on 11 February found local Protestant Serik Kubaisinov guilty of violating Article 184-2 of Uzbekistan's Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "illegal distribution of religious items". He was fined 569,500 Soms (2,745 Norwegian Kroner, 312 Euros or 405 US Dollars). Three books – two copies of the New Testament and Psalms in Russian and a New Testament in Karakalpak - seven videotapes and ten DVDs were confiscated and ordered to be destroyed by the same decision. Protestants told Forum 18 that the books were planted by the Nukus District Police officers earlier during a search, and did not belong to Kubaisinov. However, Forum 18 was told that the videotapes and DVDs, which were not religious in content, did belong to him.

The religious freedom situation is worsening across Uzbekistan. A country-wide campaign against followers of the Muslim theologian Said Nursi is underway, with harsh sentences being handed down on some Nursi followers while others remain in prison awaiting trial. Members of various Protestant churches, Hare Krishna devotees and Jehovah's Witnesses are also being detained or harassed.

Forum 18 knows of four Protestant Christians given administrative sentences of between 10 and 15 days' imprisonment since the beginning of March to punish them for their religious activity.

Can authorities 'separate the simple study of one's religion from extremist activity'?

By Felix Corley and Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (10.03.2009) / HRWF (13.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - University lecturer Ikrom Merajov is among nine men from Bukhara being held in the National Security Service (NSS) secret police isolation cells in the city under criminal investigation for membership in a "religious extremist" organisation and spreading "religious extremism". The Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 News Service the secret police is leading the investigation, but the NSS refused to discuss the case. The nine were seized last December when police and secret police raided the Merajov family home without a warrant and found them studying the writings of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi, local Muslims told Forum 18. Merajov's brother Ilhom says Ikrom Merajov has been caught up on extremism charges which are not properly defined in law and he urges the Uzbek government to "separate the simple study of one's religion from extremist activity". The authorities have arrested dozens of followers of Said Nursi across Uzbekistan since summer 2008 and a number have been imprisoned. Merajov was shown in a hostile television programme attacking the Nurcular movement in February.

Nine men arrested last December in the central city of Bukhara [Bukhoro] for studying together the writings of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi are being investigated as the authorities crack down on what they maintain are members of the organised Nurcular movement, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. One of those under arrest - university lecturer Ikrom Merajov - was featured in a television programme critical of the movement, which claimed the authorities "uncovered some crimes of a group of people who were engaged in secretly promoting the sect's ideas". It said he led the group. The

broadcast also reported long terms of imprisonment handed down to other Nursi followers in the capital Tashkent.

Muslim sources told Forum 18 that the movement is not organised and is a voluntary group of Muslims seeking to know more about their faith. They insist that those arrested in Bukhara have nothing to do with politics.

Refusing to discuss Merajov's case or the wider crackdown on Nursi followers is the government's Religious Affairs Committee in Tashkent. An official who would not give his name told Forum 18 on 10 March that they do not give interviews over the phone. Asked whether it is allowed to read and discuss the Koran in private flats, he hung up the phone.

Speaking up on behalf of his brother is Ilhom Merajov, a university lecturer who now lives in Russia. "A young teacher must be developed all round, including knowing his own faith," he told Forum 18. "This requires a deep knowledge and understanding of religious literature. In effect, my brother has become a victim of his profession as a lecturer." He laments that his brother has been caught up on extremism charges which are not properly defined in law and he urges the Uzbek government to "separate the simple study of one's religion from extremist activity".

Ilhom Merajov also questions the use of his brother - who has not been found guilty - in a critical and tendentious television film which he argues is designed to persuade the public that "extremists" are present in society. "Such methods are not used in a law-governed state," Ilhom Merajov told Forum 18.

Zavkidin Merajov, Ikrom's father, has written enquiries about his son's detention to the Uzbek Parliament's Human Rights Ombudsperson Sayora Rashidova, but has received no response. Dilnoza Muradova of the Ombudsperson's office told Forum 18 on 10 March that neither Rashidova nor any of her deputies were available to speak on the case since "they are all visiting regions". An official in the Complaints Department, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 they have not received any complaints on Merajov. Asked why people are not allowed to read and discuss the Koran in private flats, the official responded: "Let them complain to us."

Zavkidin Merajov has also written to the government's Religious Affairs Committee, Forum 18 has learnt.

Ikrom Merajov, who will be 37 next month and is married with two children, studied at Novosibirsk State University in Russia in the 1990s before returning to Uzbekistan to teach at Bukhara State University.

On the evening of 22 December 2008, police and National Security Service (NSS) secret police burst into the Merajov family home in Bukhara where he and eight other men had gathered, Muslim sources told Forum 18. "They were peacefully sitting and talking and were not violating social order." The police and secret police conducted a search which the family insists was illegal. "They had no warrant, the required witnesses were not present during the search and no record of items taken away for analysis was drawn up."

Taken away were 79 religious books (twenty of them by Said Nursi), 19 computer print-outs (which the authorities describe as "leaflets"), three computers, 139 compact discs, 26 exercise books, 16 audio-cassettes and two notepads.

Ikrom Merajov and his eight guests were all arrested: Muzaffar Allayorov, Botir Tukhtamuradov, Alisher Jumaev, Abdurahmon Musaev, Bobomurod Sanoev, Jamshid Ramazonov, Salohiddin Kosimov and Shuhrat Karimov. Late that evening they were taken to the city police station. "We'll lock them up for 15 days for meeting together and

reading religious books," police told Merajov's parents, "there's no way we can put up with them any longer."

At a closed court hearing on 30 December, a Bukhara City Criminal Court ordered their continued detention in the NSS secret police investigation isolation cells and a criminal investigation of the nine began.

Ibadullo Nurov, Bukhara's Deputy Regional Prosecutor, was unavailable to speak on the case to Forum 18. However, the Prosecutor's office told Forum 18 on 10 March that "the city criminal court sanctioned the arrests, and the Bukhara Department of the NSS is leading the case".

A judge of the Bukhara City Criminal Court, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 10 March that "the court is not going to give any information on the case over the phone." Asked whether it is illegal to read and discuss the Koran in a private flat, he said, "Look I am in the midst of a court process," and hung up the phone.

Forum 18 tried without success to reach Farhodjon Oltiev, Bukhara's Chief NSS Investigator who has been involved in the case. The NSS Regional Department asked Forum 18 several times on 10 March to call back later. Finally Forum 18 was told it was a "wrong number".

The nine men are accused of violating Criminal Code Article 244-1 Part 2, which punishes "distribution in any form of information and materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism or fundamentalism, calls for pogroms or the violent expulsion of citizens or directed at creating panic among the population, as well as the use of religion with the aim of breaking civic accord, the distribution of slanderous fabrications destabilising the situation and the carrying out of other actions directed against the established rules of conduct in society and social security". They are also accused of violating Article 244-2 Part 1, which punishes "creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist or fundamentalist or other banned organisations". Both Articles carry heavy penalties.

Investigators accused Merajov of participating in the activity of the "illegal religious extremist organisation Nurcular". They said he was teaching from the works of Said Nursi without the special permission required from the government's Religious Affairs Committee. Local Muslims told Forum 18 that between ten and fifteen friends of the nine were detained for up to 15 days as part of the investigation.

Although the nine were arrested in the evening of 22 December and the literature taken away for analysis, the following day Bukhara City Hokimat (administration) had already provided a written "expert assessment" that the aim of the "illegal" Nurcular movement was to seize power. It said that although the literature contained no open calls to overthrow the constitutional authorities, it aimed to create the basis for "separatism and religious fundamentalism". It also said the movement aimed to import and distribute their books which it claimed had been banned by the Religious Affairs Committee.

Bobir Karimov, aide to the Regional Hokim (head of the administration) on religious issues, was also unavailable to speak to Forum 18 on 10 March. One of Karimov's colleagues, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 he was "not ready to speak on the case to just anyone over the phone".

However, local Muslims insist the nine men are innocent of any wrongdoing. They say there was no illegal organisation and that the nine had merely gathered to learn more about their own faith, studying together the works of Said Nursi. They point out that his books were legally published in Uzbekistan by the state-backed Muslim Board and a publishing house of the Education Ministry and were read out on state radio. "There is no

incitement to extremism in any of his works," they told Forum 18. They pointed to a declaration by Russia's Council of Muftis from 2004 that Nursi's works are "far from inciting any form of discord or enmity".

Local Muslims told Forum 18 that the nine men's families were able to visit them on 24 February two months after they were arrested, the first such visit.

The intensity of the government's campaign against what they perceive as organised groups of Nurcular followers was seen by the 16 February television broadcast on Uzbekistan's First Channel entitled "Light leading to darkness". According to BBC Monitoring, the programme claimed that the Nurcular "sect" entered Uzbekistan to pursue its "malicious intentions" shortly after the country gained independence. It said it had set up Turkish schools as a way to inculcate its ideas but the government had closed these in 1999. However, it claimed the movement had resumed its activities in Uzbekistan in 2006 "using new tactics".

The programme said Tashkent City Criminal Court recently found eight "former members of the Nurcular sect" guilty of "preparing and distributing materials that pose threat to public security and order; setting up, leading and being involved in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist and other banned organisations". The eight - Eldor Shermatov, Anvar Sharipov, Jamshid Rasulov, Oktam Bekiev, Olimjon Musaev, Muzaffar Karimov, Sharofiddin Gofurov and Baht Abdugafforov - were given sentences of between six and a half and eight years' imprisonment.

The 16 February programme also featured Bakhrom Ibrahimov, one of five writers for the Islamic-inspired periodical Irmoq (Spring) sentenced to imprisonment of between 8 and 12 years by a Tashkent court on 26 February. They were also accused of being Nurcular followers.

The programme also reported that police had seized books, compact discs and videotapes from a private home in the town of Asaka in the eastern Andijan [Andijon] Region close to the border with Kyrgyzstan. It said a women's group there "were engaged in promoting the sect's ideas".

The programme warned viewers to be vigilant against "the attacks of various movements and evil forces which are attempting to undermine our peace, freedom, and lead us astray from our chosen path".

Uzbekistan's state-run media often publish or broadcast material defaming religious communities in what observers have told Forum 18 is an attempt to stir up society against such communities. Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses - who are also frequent victims of raids, arrests and confiscations of religious literature - were attacked in a television programme broadcast nationally in May and June 2008

How many religious believers barred from travelling?

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (06.03.2009) / HRWF (07.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Natalya Kadyrova is one of several Protestant Christians known to Forum 18 News Service to have been denied the exit visas Uzbek citizens need before they can leave their own country, apparently as punishment for their religious activity. The wife of a pastor of a Tashkent Protestant church, Kadyrova has already been fined for her involvement with her church. Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that their adherents have faced exit visa denials in the recent past. Human rights defenders

are among others who face similar problems. However, Saken Kojahmetov, head of the Department of Entry and Exit at the Interior Ministry's Department of Entry, Exit and Legalisation of Citizenship in Tashkent, denied this to Forum 18. "We don't obstruct Uzbek citizens from travelling freely," he claimed. Asked why a number of religious believers cannot get exit visas, he responded: "If some people are saying this, let them come to me and raise their case and we will resolve it."

Challenging the Uzbek authorities' refusal to grant her the exit visa Uzbek citizens need before they can travel abroad is Natalya Kadyrova, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Kadyrova is the wife of the pastor of a Protestant congregation in the capital Tashkent and it appears that the exit visa denial is a punishment for her religious activity. Some citizens known by the authorities to be active in religious communities have faced problems gaining exit visas. Although apparently not a common punishment, it remains unclear how extensive the practice is. However, exit visa denials appear to be part of a pattern of isolating religious believers in Uzbekistan from their fellow-believers abroad.

Despite the denial to Kadyrova, an ethnic Russian Uzbek citizen, several religious believers have told Forum 18 that the authorities are generally reluctant to deny exit visas to ethnic Russians, though such denials have occurred. All the other current cases known to Forum 18 – all Protestant Christians – affect ethnic Uzbeks, Karakalpaks and Koreans.

Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses have complained that their adherents have faced similar problems in the recent past, though representatives Forum 18 spoke to know of no current exit visa denials affecting their adherents. A Jehovah's Witness – who asked not to be named – said they have had no cases in the last six months.

Denying that any obstructions exist for religious believers to gain exit visas is Saken Kojahmetov, head of the Department of Entry and Exit at the Interior Ministry's Department of Entry, Exit and Legalisation of Citizenship in Tashkent. "We don't obstruct Uzbek citizens from travelling freely," he claimed to Forum 18 on 4 March. He insisted that citizens are refused permission to travel abroad only if they have committed crimes on previous foreign visits. He refused to say why exit visas are still necessary when they have been abolished in every other former Soviet republic.

Asked to explain why a number of religious believers have been refused exit visas in recent years – including some at the moment – or have difficulty obtaining them Kojahmetov again rejected this. "If some people are saying this, let them come to me and raise their case and we will resolve it," he told Forum 18. He refused to explain why such individuals needed to travel to his office in Tashkent to resolve the problem.

Kadyrova, the Tashkent Protestant, lodged her application at the Department of Entry, Exit and Legalisation of Citizenship in the city's Chilanazar District on 19 December, Protestants told Forum 18. Although officials are required to respond within fifteen days they failed to do so.

In a subsequent complaint to Sayora Rashidova, the Uzbek Parliament's Human Rights Ombudsperson, Kadyrova insisted there is "no legal basis" for denying the exit visa and said no reason had been given. She pointed out that she has no criminal record and is not registered as a psychiatric patient or drug addict, or as suffering from tuberculosis or a venereal disease. Protestants confirmed to Forum 18 on 5 March that officials were still refusing to grant her exit visa.

Eskhol Full Gospel Church in Tashkent, led by Kadyrova's husband Serik Kadyrov, has been repeatedly denied legal status. Both she and her husband have been among church members fined under the Code of Administrative Offences for their religious activity.

Various Protestant communities in different parts of Uzbekistan have told Forum 18 of several other cases at present where their members have been denied exit visas. However, they asked that the names of individuals not be made public in the hope that the denial of exit visas can be overturned quietly. In some cases officials have told citizens that the National Security Service (NSS) secret police has informed the Department of Entry, Exit and Legalisation of Citizenship not to issue exit visas because of their religious activities. In other cases officials gave no reasons.

Human rights groups have noted that the Uzbek authorities have also long refused exit visas to human rights activists, representatives of the political opposition and journalists.

Uzbek citizens get their passports when they are 16 years old. Such passports need to be updated when they reach 25 and again 45. Those wishing to travel abroad (apart from to several other former Soviet republics) need to get an exit visa, which is valid for two years, from their local Department of Entry, Exit and Legalisation of Citizenship where they live. Citizens need to complete a two-page form with full details about themselves, their immediate family (whether alive or dead), where they have ever worked, what countries they have visited and why they wish to travel abroad. The form needs to be stamped by their employer or, for those without a job, the chair of their Mahalla (residential district) committee.

If the exit visa is granted, it is stuck into the passport and the citizen can travel to any country during the two-year period provided they get an entry visa, if required, for the foreign country.

The authorities have long used exit visa denials as a way to punish religious believers further. Among previous victims was Erkin Khabibov, a Jehovah's Witness from Bukhara [Bukhoro]. He was denied an exit visa in about 2002 after he was found guilty under the administrative code of preaching Jehovah's Witness beliefs.

Several religious believers from different parts of Uzbekistan told Forum 18 that if a citizen is denied an exit visa it is possible to pressure officials to relent in some cases. "If you insist and threaten to make a fuss you can eventually get the decision overturned," one citizen from a city a long way from Tashkent told Forum 18. "I know of several fellow-believers who in the end managed to get their exit visas this way."

A Tashkent-based Protestant told Forum 18 that several years ago an ethnic Russian Protestant pastor in the city was denied an exit visa. "He told the head of the city district Department that he would write complaints and there would be an international scandal if they didn't give him the exit visa," the Protestant told Forum 18. "They immediately gave it to him."

Human rights activists have also occasionally been successful in having exit visa denials overturned, as Tashkent-based human rights defender Surat Ikramov told Forum 18 on 6 March.

Religious believers and human rights activists point out that corruption can also be a reason officials obstruct the granting of exit visas.

Uzbekistan is the only former Soviet republic that still has exit visas. Turkmenistan abolished its exit visa requirement in 2004, though some prominent religious believers remain unable to leave Turkmenistan because they remain on the exit blacklist.

Although in theory having an exit visa is sufficient to travel – unless an arrest warrant has been issued – religious believers are among those who have been prevented from crossing the border by the Uzbek authorities at the last minute.

Local residents who have travelled abroad for what the Uzbek authorities suspect are religious motives – especially to study their faith at a foreign college – are especially closely scrutinised on returning to the country, members of different religious communities told Forum 18. "Our students from Uzbekistan routinely face questioning about their studies and have all the course materials and books taken from them as they return home," a teacher in a religious college in another former Soviet republic told Forum 18.

Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is have told Forum 18 of recent cases where their adherents have been questioned and searched when leaving Uzbekistan to take part in religious events or meetings abroad or when returning.

As well as obstructing some of its own citizens from leaving, Uzbekistan also has prevented known foreign religious activists from entering the country, members of various religious communities have told Forum 18. Would-be religious visitors can be denied visas at Uzbek consulates around the world or, even if they have visas, can be denied entry once they arrive in the country.

Long-term resident foreign citizens who were active in religious communities have also been expelled in recent years. Uzbekistan's Chief Rabbi, Abe David Gurevich, and his wife Malka Gurevich, who also worked for the Tashkent branch of the Hasidic World Lubavitch Movement, were forced to leave the country in June 2008 after the authorities refused to renew their accreditation. Several foreign Protestants were expelled in 2007 and 2008.

You call white black and black white

By Mushfig Bayram and Felix Corley

Forum 18 (27.02.2009) / HRWF (07.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Uzbekistan imposed harsh prison sentences yesterday (26 February) on five writers for the Islamic periodical *Irmoq* (Spring), Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The verdicts were: Bakhrom Ibrahimov and Davron Kabilov received 12 year sentences in general regime labour camps; Rovshanbek Vafojev received a ten year general regime labour camp sentence; and Abdulaziz Dadahonov and Botyrbek Eshkuziyev each received eight year general regime labour camp sentences. Uzbek officials have refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. All five were arrested in mid-2008 by the NSS secret police on "suspicion of being sponsored by a Turkish radical religious movement Nursi." The Ezgulik human rights society stated that the defendants insisting they had violated no laws. "We want children to know the truth, to be able to tell the difference between black and white," they told the court. "But you call white black and black white." The verdict in a similar case against contributors to the *Yetti Iqlim* (Seven Climates) Islamic periodical is awaited. As part of the continuing crackdown on religious literature, pressure also continues on Baptists distributing literature in the street.

Judge Farhod Igitayev of Tashkent Criminal Court has imposed harsh prison sentences in the trial of five writers for the Islamic periodical *Irmoq* (Spring), Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The verdicts, imposed on 26 February were: Bakhrom Ibrahimov and Davron Kabilov received 12 year sentences in general regime labour camps; Rovshanbek Vafojev received a ten year general regime labour camp sentence; and Abdulaziz Dadahonov and Botyrbek Eshkuziyev each received eight year general regime labour camp sentences. All five were found guilty of violating Article 244-1 and Article 244-2 of the Criminal Code, the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights society told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 26 February.

Judge Vakhit Sharipov, Deputy Chair of Tashkent City Criminal Court, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 over the telephone on 27 February, or even to say what crime the Irmoq writers had committed. Judge Sharipov has previously denied that Tashkent City Criminal Court tried the Irmoq contributors. The Judge then referred all enquiries to the Foreign Ministry, who also refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 27 February.

Irmoq has been closely monitored, and the five contributors arrested by the National Security Service (NSS) secret police in June and August 2008, on "suspicion of being sponsored by a Turkish radical religious movement Nursi". Russian translations of the works of Turkish Islamic theologian Said Nursi have been banned in Russia, following controversial claims by the authorities that they are "extremist".

Ibrahimov was the first to be arrested, on 27 June 2008, with the other four being arrested on 16 August, the Ezgulik human rights society told Forum 18.

Ezgulik stated that, in their closing statements on 20 February, the defendants reaffirmed their innocence, insisting they had violated no laws and had done nothing against the country. "We want children to know the truth, to be able to tell the difference between black and white," they told the court. "But you call white black and black white."

The books of Said Nursi were freely available in Uzbek bookshops until 2000, Ezgulik noted, and "any family" could still have copies at home. The import, production and distribution of all religious literature in Uzbekistan is under highly restrictive state control, even for texts such as the Koran and the Bible.

The trial of the five Irmoq writers began at Tashkent City Criminal Court on 16 February. The five were accused of violating Article 244-1 of the Criminal Code, which punishes the "dissemination of information and materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism, calls for pogroms or violent eviction of individuals, or aimed at creating panic among the population, as well as the use of religion in purposes of breach of civil concord, dissemination of calumnious and destabilising fabrications, and committing other acts aimed against the established rules of conduct in society and of public security". They were also accused of violating Article 244-2 of the Criminal Code, which punishes "creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations".

During the trial, Judge Igitalev rejected calls by the defendants for officials of the government's Religious Affairs Committee to be summoned to court. The five defendants wanted Religious Affairs Committee officials to testify why they thought the materials published in Irmoq represented a threat under Criminal Code Articles 244-1 and 244-2.

The Religious Affairs Committee refused to talk to Forum 18 about the case on 27 February, also claiming that their Chair was "on a business trip."

In a second similar case, which began on 18 February at Tashkent City Court, Judge Mirzajonov presided over the trial of Bakhrom Tajiev, Shavkat Ismoilov and M. Shakhabitdinov. Tajiev, the editor of the Yetti Iqlim (Seven Climates) Islamic periodical, and Ismoilov had been arrested on 6 November 2008. Shakhabitdinov had been arrested in August 2008.

Both Irmoq and Yetti Iqlim had begun publication in early 2007 and continued publication – in small print-runs and on the internet – until they were banned in August 2008 as the second wave of arrests began.

Ezgulik noted that another Islamic-inspired journal, Odamlar orasida (Among People), had been banned by the State Agency of Press and Information in July 2007.

Some commentators have seen the trials as part of an Uzbek government attempt to root out what remains of Nurcular influence in the country. Ezgulik also declared that 12 other followers of the Nur movement led by Fethullah Gulen have been arrested, 11 in Khorezm and one in the capital – Mansurali Arraboev, a teacher at Tashkent's Islamic Institute.

Meanwhile, pressure has continued on Council of Churches Baptists who offer their literature on the streets. On 11 February two Baptists from the city of Fergana were found guilty by an administrative court of violating Article 184-2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes "illegal production, import, storage of distribution of religious literature". Vladimir Andoniu and Vladimir Potekhin were each fined, 485,000 Soms (2,300 Norwegian Kroner, 270 Euros, or 340 US Dollars) and 250,000 Soms (1,185 Norwegian Kroner, 130 Euros, or 170 US Dollars) respectively, local Baptists told Forum 18 on 22 February.

They note that the cases against two other Baptists – Artur Alpaev and Aleksandr Avdeev – were sent back to prosecutors for them to decide whether they should face administrative or criminal proceedings. The action against the four follows earlier action against Baptists offering their literature in Tashkent.

Judge B. Bekzhanova of Nukus District Criminal Court on 11 February fined local Protestant Serik Kubaisinov 569,500 Soms (2,847 Norwegian Kroner, 320 Euros, or 405 US Dollars) under Article 184-2 of the Administrative Code. Two books "New Testament and Psalms," in Russian, a "Khosh Khabar" (New Testament in Karakalpak language), seven videotapes and ten DVDs were confiscated and ordered to be destroyed by the same decision.

Protestants told Forum 18 that the books were planted by the Nukus District Police officers earlier during a search, and did not belong to Kubaisinov. However, Forum 18 was told that the videotapes and DVDs, which were not religious in content, did belong to Kubaisinov.

In a separate case in Nukus, three local Protestants - Vladimir Kim, Ulash Bazarbaeva and Darikhan Toremuratova – have failed to have fines imposed in late 2008 overturned. The Supreme Court of Karakalpakstan on 21 January upheld the fines on each one of 25,040 Soms (120 Norwegian Kroner, 14 Euros or 18 US Dollars).

In addition to the fines, the court had ordered the confiscation of a Bible, a New Testament in Kazakh and a Christian brochure.

Muslims and Christians latest victims of religious literature crackdown

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (17.02.2009) / HRWF (18.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Uzbekistan continues to attack the sharing of information and opinion in religious literature, Forum 18 News Service notes. In the most recent known cases, contributors to two Islamic religious periodicals – Irmoq (Spring) and Yetti Iqlim (Seven Climates) – are facing criminal charges, allegedly for distributing information on the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi. Obiddin Makhmudov of Uzbekistan's state Agency of Press and Information told Forum 18 that "I just found out yesterday from the national TV channel that the magazine's [Irmoq's] staff are suspected of having ties with a banned religious organisation." Baptists are being punished for distributing religious literature free-of-charge, in one case being questioned for seven hours without food or

water. A different Baptist has been fired from his job as an electrician, after the NSS secret police and ordinary police confiscated his religious literature from his mother-in-law's flat. Asked by Forum 18 why police raided the flat, Police Inspector Alisher Umarov claimed they were "allowed" to do passport control "anywhere and anytime."

Uzbekistan continues to attack people peacefully sharing information and opinion in religious literature, Forum 18 News Service notes. In the most recent known cases, contributors to two Islamic religious newspapers – Irmoq (Spring) and Yetti Iqlim (Seven Climates) – and Baptists are being punished for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Obiddin Makhmudov, Head of the Licensing Department of Uzbekistan's State Agency of Press and Information, denied that Irmoq had been stripped of its license. "I just found out yesterday from the national TV channel that the magazine's [Irmoq's] staff are suspected of having ties with a banned religious organisation," he told Forum 18 on 17 February.

Makhmudov said that as his Department has licensed "hundreds of publications," he could not specifically monitor Irmoq articles. "I do not know what they really published," he insisted, when asked what Irmoq articles the authorities objected to. Asked whether Irmoq would be stripped of its license to publish, Makhmudov told Forum 18 he could not say anything concrete at the moment. "We need to wait and see what decision the authorities will make," he stated.

The former Internet provider of Irmoq, bcc.uz, told Forum 18 on 16 February that Irmoq's website was blocked by them because the publication "did not pay their fees." Uzbek internet providers have told Forum 18 that the National Security Service (NSS) secret police decides what websites they block.

Bakhrom Ibrahimov, Rovshanbek Vafojev, Davron Kabilov, Abdulaziz Dadakhonov and Botyrbek Eshkuziyev, all of whom wrote for Irmoq, are on trial for breaking Article 244-1 of the Criminal Code. This punishes the "dissemination of information and materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism, calls for pogroms or violent eviction of individuals, or aimed at creating panic among the population, as well as the use of religion in purposes of breach of civil concord, dissemination of calumnious and destabilising fabrications, and committing other acts aimed against the established rules of conduct in society and of public security." The same article was used against Pentecostal prisoner of conscience Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, sentenced in March 2007 to four years in an open work camp.

One of the Irmoq contributors - Ibrahimov - was arrested in June 2008, while the other four were arrested in August 2008 by the NSS secret police on "suspicion of being sponsored by a Turkish radical religious movement Nursi." According to the NSS, a group of Nursi followers from Kazakhstan sponsored Irmoq's publication. Russian translations of the works of Turkish Islamic theologian Said Nursi have been banned in Russia, following controversial claims by the authorities that they are "extremist".

The import and production of all religious literature in Uzbekistan is under tight state control, even for texts such as the Koran and the Bible.

The verdict in the Irmoq case is expected on 19 February, the Ezgulik (Goodness) human rights society told Forum 18 on 17 February. Irmoq was the second Islamic periodical publication to be closed down within the last two years, Voice of Freedom news agency reported on 26 January. Yetti Iqlim was the other closed periodical, and is being accused of co-operating with Irmoq. Verdicts in the Yetti Iqlim case are also expected this week (see forthcoming F18News article).

Judge Vakhit Sharipov, Deputy Chairman of Tashkent City Criminal Court denied that his court tried the Irmoq contributors. "The case was heard in one of Tashkent's district courts," he told Forum 18 on 17 February. Sharipov refused to say when and where the trial happened. Judge Ismatullo Mamanov of Tashkent Regional Criminal Court also did not want to talk to Forum 18 on 17 February. "I do not know what you are talking about," he said. He then hung up the phone.

Uzbekistan has also been confiscating Protestant Christian literature across the country in January and February, Forum 18 has been told. The authorities are considering whether to bring administrative or criminal charges against the "offenders".

One "offender", Marat Litvinchuk, has already been punished by being on 11 February fired from his job. A member of the capital Tashkent's officially registered Baptist Church, Litvinchuk was dismissed from his post as an electrician at the Uzbekistan State Property Maintenance Agency.

On 1 February, ten days prior to Litvinchuk's dismissal, Tashkent's Shaykhantaur District Police had raided the flat of Alla Saakyants, Litvinchuk's mother-in-law. They confiscated Litvinchuk's 67 Christian books, 223 CDs and DVDs of Christian films and sermons, and a Pentium 4 computer hard disk, Forum 18 was told on 11 February by a source in Tashkent which did not wish to be named. Police Inspector Alisher Umarov, who was among those who raided Saakyants' flat, told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 6 February that the police "may even bring criminal charges" against Litvinchuk and his family. Asked why police raided Saakyants' flat, Umarov claimed Uzbek law "allowed" them to do passport control "anywhere and anytime."

The NSS secret police, the source from Tashkent told Forum 18, on 10 February phoned Aidyn Kuliyeu, Senior Manager of the State Property Maintenance Agency and "demanded" he fire Litvinchuk. "Litvinchuk was compelled to write a letter 'voluntarily' resigning."

Kuliyeu told Forum 18 that he "does not know why he [Litvinchuk] left his job" and denied he was called by the NSS secret police. He said he "knew nothing" about the religious beliefs of Litvinchuk, or that religious literature had been confiscated from him.

Police Inspector Umarov told Forum 18 that "the Christian religion is not banned in Uzbekistan. But, we need to check and see if the books and other materials have been authorised by the state Religious Affairs Committee". If the confiscated materials are unauthorised, police "may even bring criminal charges" against the family members. If they are authorised, the police will return the materials he claimed. The Religious Affairs Committee is responsible for the censorship and "expert assessment" of all religious literature.

The Religious Affairs Committee refused to talk to Forum 18 on 11 February on confiscations of literature and closure of the religious publications. "We do not give interviews over the phone," said the person who answered the phone at the Committee. He then hung up the telephone.

Council of Churches Baptists – who refuse to register their congregations with the state - also reported of several cases of confiscation of their literature across Uzbekistan.

In the Tashkent district of Mirza-Ulugbek, Lidiya Guseva and 74 year old Vladimir Musatov, were on 24 January arrested and taken to the district police station. The Baptists had been distributing free-of-charge Bibles, copies of the New Testament in Uzbek, magazines and tracts. The arrests of the Baptists followed a person in plain clothes approaching them and asking "who gave you permission to pass out literature." He then called someone on his mobile phone.

Eight people in cars then arrived at the bookstand, and surrounded it. At the same time an Uzbek man wanted to receive a free-of-charge Uzbek-language New Testament from the Baptists. The plain clothes people from the cars forced the Uzbek man to return the New Testament and hit one of the Baptist's hands, causing the tracts he was holding to be scattered on the ground.

At the police station the Baptists were detained and questioned for more than seven hours, without being offered water or food. Lieutenant Ulugbek Nazarov made an official record of the Baptist's statements and the confiscation of the literature. The Baptists refused to write statements, sign official records, or answer any questions. They were taken from room to room at the police station, where different officers kept asking the same questions: "Who is your leader?"; "Where did you get the books?"; and "Why aren't you registered?"

Police Major Koldirbekov denied to Forum 18 that they had confiscated the Baptists' literature. "We brought them [Guseva and Musatov] in to check the literature they passed out on the street," he told Forum 18 on 16 February. "We returned their literature on the same day, as soon as we were told by the Religious Committee that it was authorized." Koldirbekov also denied that they had kept the Baptists at the station for seven hours. "We had a short conversation with them, and then released them," he insisted.

Major Koldirbekov also told Forum 18 that Hamza District Police were "investigating whether to open a criminal case against the unregistered Baptist church in Hamza district." Unregistered religious activity is a criminal offence in Uzbekistan.

Similar recent actions, by the police and NSS secret police, against Council of Churches Baptists distributing literature are known to Forum 18 in both the Hamza district of Tashkent and the eastern city of Fergana [Fargona].

Children and parents threatened for attending places of worship

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (12.01.2009) / HRWF (19.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A campaign has been unleashed in the city of Karshi [Qarshi] in Uzbekistan's south-eastern Kashkadarya Region against children attending places of worship and their parents, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The authorities' campaign followed a 25 November article in a local newspaper attacking schools and parents for allowing children to attend mosques and religious "sects". Baptist and Jehovah's Witness children were summoned and threatened by Police, Mahalla Committees and school administrations. Although measures against Muslim children are ostensibly taken to stop them from attending Friday prayers, which fall in school time, Forum 18 has found that such measures are in practice aimed at preventing them from attending mosque even outside school hours.

Three school headteachers in Karshi told Forum 18 separately that none of their children attend mosque even outside school hours, two of them declaring bluntly to Forum 18 on 9 January: "Children are not permitted to attend mosque." Asked why they cannot do so, one headteacher told Forum 18: "Because they are still children."

Police Inspector Ochilov of Karshi Police - who compelled schoolchildren and their parents who attend Jehovah's Witness and Baptist meetings to write statements including

detailed information on the organisations - refused to discuss why children and their parents are being pressured. "Ask the Regional Hokimat [administration] about it," he told Forum 18 on 6 January. Neither was Mamatkul Rajapov, responsible for work with religious organisations at Kashkadarya Regional Hokimat, willing to talk to Forum 18 on 6 January.

An independent human rights defender from the capital Tashkent, who wanted to remain unnamed, told Forum 18 that local Police Departments in Kashkadarya Region told parents that they risked losing parental rights unless they stop taking their children to religious meetings. The advocate expressed his concern, saying that it is "clear" that administrative and criminal proceedings against the unregistered churches in Kashkadarya region will follow, and measures will be taken against the parents of those children. "The children will be put in police records for preventive work."

Imam Abdulkadir of Khonakokh mosque in Karshi, who did not give his last name, downplayed the issue, claiming that children are allowed to attend mosques. "But they can do it only after school hours," he told Forum 18 on 9 January. "We have no problems in Uzbekistan in terms of freedom of religion."

Asked whether schoolchildren are allowed to attend mosques, the imam of Karshi's Navo mosque refused to say. "Talk to the government about such issues," he told Forum 18 on 8 January.

The Council of Churches Baptists reported that on 3 December, Police Inspector Ochilov of Karshi Police summoned many children who attend Baptist services, together with their teachers and parents. "Inspector Ochilov warned that the children should neither attend religious meetings nor tell others about God," the Baptists complained to Forum 18 on 2 January. The Baptists also complained that their services in Karshi are often raided by the local authorities, who confiscate their Christian literature and make official records of the meetings.

The human rights defender from Tashkent confirmed to Forum 18 that during the 3 December meeting – also attended by Botyr Kodyrov, the Deputy Chief of Karshi Police - Inspector Ochilov compelled three schoolchildren – whose names are known to Forum 18 – and their Baptist parents to write statements.

The human rights defender told Forum 18 that not only Baptist children but also those attending Jehovah's Witnesses meetings were also summoned with their parents by Karshi Police. Police inspectors "made" children write statements. The children were "compelled" to include information in their statements on how long they have been attending the "sect", who led them to the "sect", at which address and on which days religious meetings are held, who leads the meetings, how many people attend, which religious books are read, and which fellow believers they personally know.

The police moves followed an article "Fallen into Fanaticism" by Safar Ruziboev, published on 25 November in the Uzbek-language Qashqadaryo newspaper, telling how some teachers and secondary school pupils "fell prey" to foreign religious ideas.

Some girls – who are not named - in schools number 3, 14, 26 in Karshi and number 99 in Shahrizabz District of Kashkadarya Region come to school in hijabs (Muslim headscarves), the article claims. Around 50 pupils from schools number 29, 12, 23, 43 are also said to attend mosques Khonakokh, Navo and Kilichbek-kurgancho for juma namaz (early afternoon prayer on Fridays). "Some of these pupils attend the mosques accompanied by their parents, who indoctrinate them," the article complains.

The author then focuses on minority faiths, claiming that in Karshi recently the number of non-Islamic religious "sects" and their followers increased. "The pupils of School

Number 15, Tanzilya Arslanova and Albina Buzrukova, were engaged in spreading the ideas of the non-Islamic Jehovah's Witnesses sect. Together with their like-minded fellow pupils they take part in illegal meetings held in the homes of the leaders of this sect. The pupils of the same school, Ulugbek Shomatov, Dildora Khusainova and Shahrizoda Hasanova, the pupil of School 12 Raisa Chernysh, and the student of Karshi medical college Sayera Boymuradova, whose parents are members of the Jehovah's Witnesses sect, take part in illegal gatherings," the article maintains.

"The illegally functioning Christian sect of Baptists" in Kashkadarya is claimed to be "broadening its activity." "Its members employ various methods of work with the schoolchildren in order to involve them in their unlawful activity," the article complains. It claims that Dilafruz Zhabborova, the pupil of School Number 3 in Kasan District, Kamila Tashpulatova, the pupil of Karshi special secondary School Number 1, Stanislav Kuznetsov, the pupil of school number 9, Feruz Khamraev, the pupil of School Number 11, Hilola Balikulova, the pupil of the Special School for those with Impaired Hearing and Seeing, and Shahboz Shukhratov, the pupil of a school in Chirokchi district, "fell under the influence of the illegal religious sect through either parents or acquaintances, and are engaged in propagating it where they live and study."

The article warns that imams, mahalla committees, and the management of schools must undertake "serious work" with parents to "counter" such facts. "Family-Mahalla-School conferences in the secondary schools must be reinforced, to not allow involving and participation of youth in various religious-extremist movements," the author insists. "At the end of the day, it is our common and important task to educate children."

Family-Mahalla-School conferences are held in addition to the usual parent-teacher conferences, schools in Karshi also hold meetings for parents with the participation of mahalla committee representatives once a term. Schools in Uzbekistan usually have four terms a year. One headteacher stated that it is "normal" to work with mahalla representatives.

Mahalla committees are a key part of Uzbekistan's structures of control and oppression (see F18News 27 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=936).

On 26 November, the day after publication of the article, the parents of one child were called in for a talk by Ulugbek Sattarovich (last name unknown), the headteacher of school number 1, the Baptists told Forum 18. The headteacher asked them to write statements explaining what was written in the newspaper article and to promise that their children would no longer attend religious meetings. The parents refused.

On 27 November the parents were summoned by the mahalla committee, where officials demanded that the pupil's mother promise in writing that she would not take her children to Christian meetings, which she refused to do, Forum 18 was told. "She was warned that she could be deprived of her parental rights if she did not heed the warning," the Baptists complained.

The human rights defender from Tashkent told Forum 18 that the parents of all the children whose names were mentioned in the article were called in by the management of their schools, instructed to write statements, to stop taking children to the religious meetings. Schools also arranged general assemblies, he reported. "All children were assembled in front of the schools where the article was read out-loud and the children whose names were mentioned in the article were mocked and called Wahhabis," he said.

"Wahhabism" is a form of Sunni Islam, and the term is often incorrectly used in the former Soviet Union to describe religious groups officials do not like.

The Baptists told Forum 18 that children in those general assemblies were warned to neither talk to religious believers nor attend their meetings. "We regard this as incitement of animosity and hatred on the basis of religious convictions, which is in fact prohibited by Uzbekistan's Religion Law."

After being summoned to schools, the human rights defender said, the same parents were called in by the mahalla committees, and once again instructed to write a statement pledging to stop taking their children to religious meetings. The parents were then summoned by the local police and subjected to the same demand yet again, the advocate told Forum 18. They were "threatened" by the police that they could be "deprived of their parental rights", he reported.

Narzullo Ravshanov, the Editor-in-Chief of Qashqadaryo, was not available to talk to Forum 18. His secretary referred Forum 18 on 9 January to another newspaper employee Abdurrazak Muradov. However, Muradov said he was familiar with the article but declined to make comments. He also declined to give the contact details of Ruziboev, the author of the article.

One of the headteachers, who preferred to remain unnamed, insisted to Forum 18 that the newspaper published "misinformation" about their school by accusing some of its pupils of attending mosques. "We asked the newspaper to give a rebuttal," she complained, "but they have not done so yet."

Sibira Muazzinova, the headteacher of School Number 29, told Forum 18 that no pupil from their school attended mosques during school hours. "We called an urgent meeting in the school with children and parents immediately after the article was published," she told Forum 18 from Karshi on 9 January. She said they did not identify anyone attending mosques. "The author probably confused children from our school with those of another one nearby," she said.

Children go to schools in Karshi in two shifts, one Karshi headteacher explained to Forum 18. The morning shift ends at 1:20 p.m. and exactly 10 minutes later, at 1:30 p.m., the afternoon shift begins. The Friday afternoon juma namaz starts at 1 p.m., as Imam Abdulkadir noted, and so children from the morning shift wanting to attend would have to miss some classes. Children from the afternoon shift might have some possibility to attend juma namaz without having to miss classes, but only if they could reach the school before classes start.

Imam Abdulkadir told Forum18 that he was invited to some of the schools mentioned in the article, soon after it was published, to explain to parents and children that children should not be attending mosques during school hours. "We want children to know about religion but we also want them to be good at their lessons in the school," he told Forum 18.

"The author of the article sounds like he is against schoolchildren following Islam," the imam commented. "He probably does not also know Uzbekistan's Constitution, which grants people freedom of conscience." The imam explained that the author mistakenly calls the Uzbek national headwear worn by some schoolgirls the hijab. "The hijab is a totally different kind of religious apparel," he maintained.

Headteacher Muazzinova told Forum 18 that the issue of children attending religious services was raised at their next Family-Mahalla-School conference. "We explained to children and parents that children cannot attend mosques on Fridays for juma namaz since it interferes with school hours."

Nodir Akhadov, a local human rights defender, said he had not read the article but that the media campaign did not appear to him unusual. "The authorities in Karshi oppose all

who teach doctrines other than the Uzbek government's doctrines propagated by Uzbek television channels and newspapers," he told Forum 18 on 8 January from Karshi. "The government sees opponents in the representatives of minority faiths and independent Muslim believers." Akhadov said he believed the government "fears" these religious organisations could attract many adherents, and so "lose them from their sphere of influence".

Another headteacher told Forum 18 that they had been told the author of the article was a National Security Service (NSS) secret police officer, but refused to reveal where they had the information from. Akhadov also said he did not recognise the author of the article. "I would not be surprised if the NSS secret police gave the information to the newspaper and told them to publish it."

The NSS secret police maintains a close watch on all religious communities, and actively recruits agents within them (see F18News 5 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1014).

Meanwhile, sources in Tashkent told Forum 18 that the film "In the Clutches of Ignorance" - which attacked a number of religious minorities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians and Methodists - was re-shown to students in state-run educational institutions in Tashkent and a number of other locations in late 2008.

"In one college they gathered all the students, saying they had to see it," one Tashkent resident told Forum 18. "Every student had to sign a statement to say they had seen it and are now informed." The resident said one student told the dean of the college that he did not understand Uzbek, the language the film was being shown in. The dean replied: "I don't care - you must go to see it." Mahalla committees also showed the film in recent months to local residents.

The film was shown on television first in Uzbek in May and then in Russian in June (see F18News 25 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1148).

Members of religious minorities in Uzbekistan note that media attacks often go in parallel with increased persecution and more social intolerance experienced by members of minorities. Protestants were also attacked in December 2006 by an earlier prime-time national television attack on Protestant churches, screened in two parts two nights running. The programme coincided with raids and fines on Protestant communities (see F18News 19 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=890). The programmes were - like the most recent TV film - repeated later, while newspaper attacks on religious minorities have continued intermittently.
